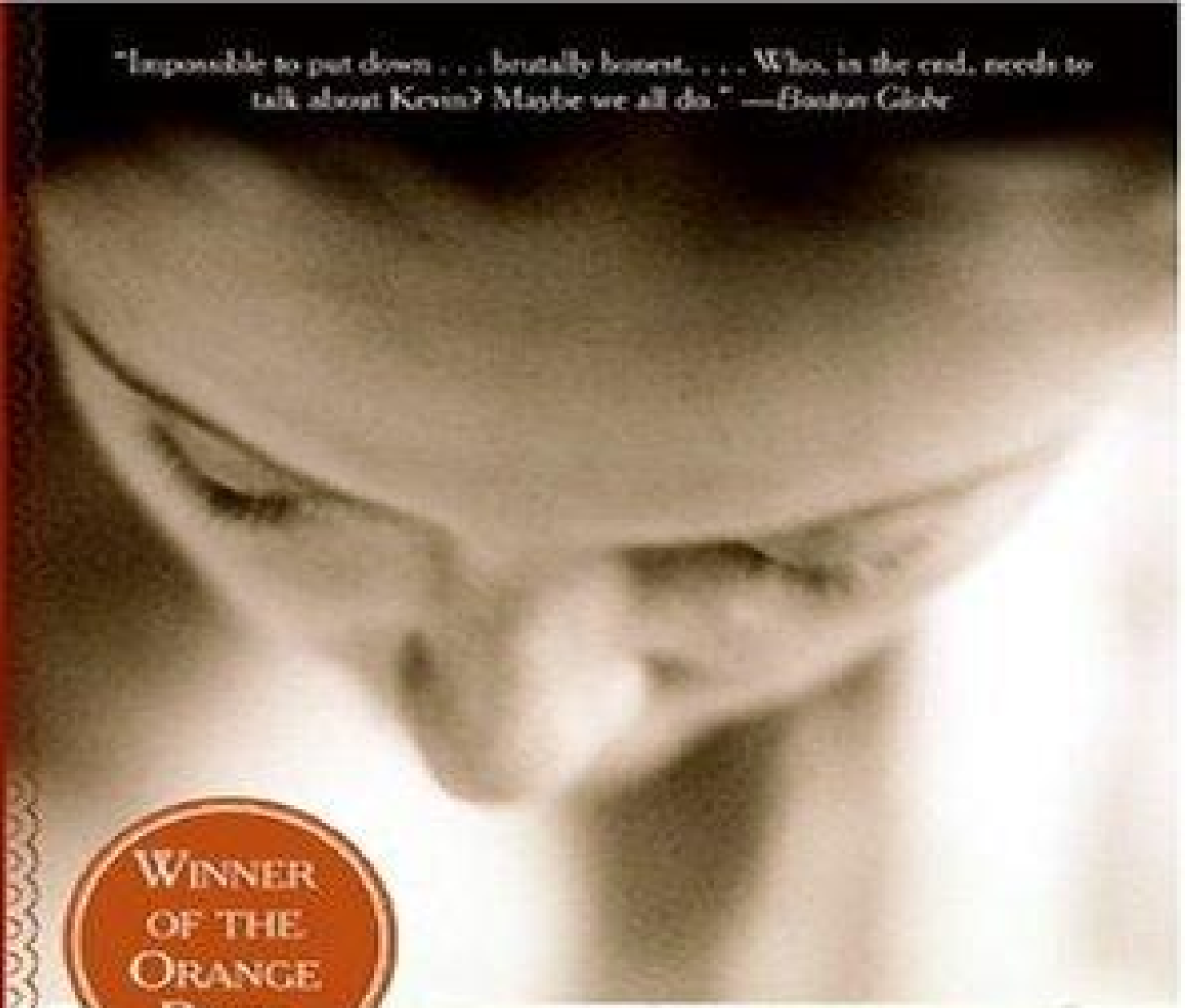
"Impossible to put down . . . brutally honest. . . . Who, in the end, needs to talk about Kevin? Maybe we all do." —*Boston Globe*



WINNER OF THE ORANGE PRIZE

We Need to Talk About Kevin

A Novel

Lionel Shriver

P.S.
INSIGHTS, INTERVIEWS & MORE...

A child needs your love most when he deserves it least.

— E r m a Bombeck

N O V E M B E R 8 , 2 0 0 0

Dear Franklin,

I ' m unsure why one trifling incident this afternoon has moved me to write to you. But since we've been separated, I may most miss coming h o m e to deliver the narrative curiosities of my day, the way a cat might lay mice at your feet: the small, humble offerings that couples proffer after foraging in separate backyards.

Were you still installed in my kitchen, slathering crunchy peanut butter on Branola though it was almost time for dinner, I'd no sooner have put down the bags, one leaking a clear viscous drool, than this little story would c o m e tumbling out, even before I chided that we're having pasta tonight so would you please not eat that whole sandwich.

In the early days, of course, my tales were exotic imports, from Lisbon, from Katmandu. But no one wants to hear stories from abroad, really, and I could detect from your telltale politeness that you privately preferred anecdotal trinkets from closer to h o m e : an eccentric encounter with a toll collector on the George Washington Bridge, say. Marvels from the mundane helped to ratify your view that all my foreign travel was a kind of cheating. My souvenirs—a packet of slightly stale Belgian waffles, the British expression for "piffle" *(codswallop!)*—were artificially imbued with magic by mere dint of distance. Like those baubles the Japanese exchange—in a box in a bag, in a box in a bag—the sheen on my offerings from far afield was all packaging. What a more considerable achievement, to root around in the untransubstantiated rubbish of plain old N e w York state and scrounge a moment of piquancy from a trip to the Nyack Grand Union.

Which is just where my story takes place. I seem finally to be learning what you were always trying to teach me, that my own country is as exotic and

even as perilous as Algeria. I was in the dairy aisle and didn't need much; I wouldn't. I never eat pasta these days, without you to dispatch most of the bowl. I do miss your gusto.

It's still difficult for me to venture into public. You would think, in a country that so famously has "no sense of history,"

as Europeans claim, that I might cash in on America's famous amnesia. No such luck. No one in this "community" shows any signs of forgetting, after a year and eight months—to the day. So I have to steel myself when provisions run low. O h , for the clerks at the 7-Eleven on Hopewell Street my novelty has worn off, and I can pick up a quart of milk without glares. But our regular Grand U n i o n remains a gauntlet.

I always feel furtive there. To compensate, I force my back straight, my shoulders square. I see now what they mean by

"holding your head high," and I am sometimes surprised by how much interior transformation a ramrod posture can afford. W h e n I stand physically proud, I feel a small measure less mortified.

Debating medium eggs or large, I glanced toward the yogurts.

A few feet away, a fellow shopper's frazzled black hair went white at the roots for a good inch, while its curl held only at the ends: an old permanent grown out. Her lavender top and matching skirt may have once been stylish, but now the blouse bound under the arms and the peplum served to emphasize heavy hips.The outfit needed pressing, and the padded shoulders bore the faint stripe of fading from a wire hanger. Something from the nether regions of the closet, I concluded, what you reach for when everything else is filthy or on the floor. As the woman's head tilted toward the processed cheese, I caught the crease of a double chin.

— 2 —

Don't try to guess; you'd never recognize her from that portrait.

She was once so neurotically svelte, sharply cornered, and glossy as if commercially gift wrapped. Though it may be more romantic to picture the bereaved as gaunt, I imagine you can grieve as efficiendy with chocolates as with tap water. Besides, there are women who keep themselves sleek and smartly turned out less to please a spouse than to keep up with a daughter, and, thanks to us, she lacks that incentive these days.

It was Mary Woolford. I'm not proud of this, but I couldn't face her. I reeled. My hands went clammy as I fumbled with the carton, checking that the eggs were whole. I rearranged my features into those of a shopper w h o had just remembered something in the next aisle over and managed to place the eggs on the child-seat without turning. Scuttling off on this pretense of mission, I left the cart behind, because the wheels squeaked. I caught my breath in soup.

I should have been prepared, and often am—girded, guarded, often to no purpose as it turns out. But I can't clank out the door in full armor to run every silly errand, and besides, how can Mary harm me now? She has tried her damnedest; she's taken me to court. Still, I could not tame my heartbeat, nor return to dairy right away, even once I realized that I'd left that embroidered bag from Egypt, with my wallet, in the cart.

W h i c h is the only reason I didn't abandon the Grand U n i o n altogether. I eventually had to skulk back to my bag, and so I meditated on Campbell's asparagus and cheese, thinking aimlessly how Warhol would be appalled by the redesign.

By the time I crept back the coast was clear, and I swept up my cart, abruptly the busy professional woman w h o must make quick work of domestic chores. A familiar role, you would think. Yet it's been so long since I thought of myself that way that I felt sure the folks ahead of me at checkout must have pegged my impatience not as the imperiousness of the second-earner for w h o m time is money, but as the moist, urgent panic of a fugitive.

W h e n I unloaded my m o d e y groceries, the egg carton felt sticky, which moved the salesclerk to flip it open. Ah. Mary Woolford had spotted me after all.

"All twelve!" the girl exclaimed. "I'll have them get you another carton."

I stopped her. " N o , no," I said. " I ' m in a hurry. I'll take t h e m as they are."

"But they're totally—"

"I'll take t h e m as they are!" There's no better way to get people to cooperate in this country than by seeming a little unhinged. After dabbing pointedly at the price code with a Kleenex, she scanned the eggs, then wiped her hands on the tissue with a rolled eye.

"Khatchadourian," the girl pronounced w h e n I handed her my debit card. She spoke loudly, as if to those waiting in line. It was late afternoon, the right shift for an after-school job; plausibly about seventeen, this girl could have been one of Kevin's classmates.

Sure, there are half a dozen high schools in this area, and her family might have just moved here from California. But from the look in her eye I didn't think so. She fixed me with a hard stare.

"That's an unusual name."

I ' m not sure what got into me, but I ' m so tired of this. It's not that I have no shame. Rather, I ' m exhausted with shame, slippery all over with its sticky albumen taint. It is not an emotion that leads anywhere. " I ' m the only Khatchadourian in N e w York state," I flouted, and snatched my card back. She threw my eggs in a bag, where they drooled a litde more.

So n o w I ' m h o m e — w h a t passes for it. Of course you've never been here, so allow me to describe it for you.

You'd be taken aback. N o t least because I've opted to remain in Gladstone, after kicking up such a fuss about moving to the suburbs in the first place.

But I felt I should stay within driving distance of Kevin. Besides, much as I crave anonymity, it's not that I want my neighbors to forget w h o I am; I want to, and that is not

an opportunity any town affords.This is the one place in the world where the ramifications of my life are fully felt, and it's far less important to me to be liked these days than to be understood.

I'd enough of a pittance left over after paying off the lawyers to buy a little place of my own, but the tentativeness of renting suited. Likewise my living in this Tinkertoy duplex seemed a fitting marriage of temperaments. O h , you'd be horrified; its flimsy pressboard cabinetry defies your father's motto, "Materials are everything." But it is this very quality of barely hanging on that I cherish.

Everything here is precarious.The steep stairway to the second floor has no banister, spicing my ascent to bed with vertigo after three glasses of wine.The floors creak and the window frames leak, and there is an air about the place of fragility and underconfidence, as if at any moment the entire structure might simply blink out like a bad idea. Swinging on rusty coat hangers from a live wire across the ceiling, the tiny halogen bulbs downstairs have a tendency to flicker, and their tremulous light contributes to the on-again, off-again sensation that permeates my new life. Likewise the innards of my sole telephone socket are disgorged; my uncertain connection to the outside world dangles by two poorly soldered wires, and it often cuts off. Though the landlord has promised me a proper stove, I really don't mind the hot plate—whose " o n " light doesn't work. T h e inside handle of the front door often comes off in my hand. So far I've been able to work it back on again, but the stump of the lock shaft teases me with intimations of my mother: unable to leave the house.

I recognize, too, my duplex's broad tendency to stretch its resources to the very limit. The heating is feeble, rising off the radiators in a stale, shallow breath, and though it is only early November, I have already cranked their

regulators on full.When I shower, I use all hot water and no cold; it's just warm enough that I don't shiver, but awareness that there is no reserve permeates my ablutions with disquiet. The refrigerator dial is set at its highest point, and the milk keeps only three days.

— 5 —

As for the decor, it evokes a quality of mockery that feels apt.

T h e downstairs is painted in a slapdash, abrasively bright yellow, the brush-strokes careless and aerated with streaks of underlying white, as if scrawled with crayon. Upstairs in my bedroom, the walls are sponged amateurishly in aqua, like primary-school daubs.

This tremulous little house—it doesn't feel quite *real*, Franklin.

A n d neither do I.

Yet I do hope that you're n o t feeling sorry for me; it's n o t my intention that you do. I might have found more palatial accommodation, if that's what I wanted. I like it here, in a way.

It's unserious, toy. I live in a dollhouse. Even the furniture is out of scale. T h e dining table strikes chest-high, which makes me feel underage, and the little bedside table on which I have perched this laptop is m u c h too low for typing—about the right height for serving coconut cookies and pineapple juice to kindergartners.

Maybe this askew, juvenile atmosphere helps to explain w h y yesterday, in a presidential election, I didn't vote. I simply forgot.

Everything around me seems to take place so far away. And n o w rather than pose a firm counterpoint to my dislocation, the country seems to have joined me in the realm of the surreal. T h e votes are tallied. But as in some Kafka tale, no one seems to k n o w w h o won.

And I have this dozen eggs—what's left of them. I've emptied the remains into a bowl and fished out the shards of shell. If you were here I might whip us up a nice frittata, with diced potato, cilantro, that one teaspoon of sugar that's the secret. Alone, I'll slop them in a skillet, scramble, and sullenly pick. But I will eat them all the same.There was something about Mary's gesture that I found, in an inchoate sort of way, rather elegant.

Food revulsed me at first.Visiting my m o t h e r in Racine, I turned green before her stuffed dolma, though she'd spent all day blanching grape leaves and rolling the lamb and rice filling into neat parcels; I reminded her they could be frozen. In Manhattan, w h e n I scurried past the 57th Street deli on the way to Harvey's

law office, the peppery smell of pastrami fat would flip my stomach. But the nausea passed, and I missed it. W h e n after four or five months I began to get hungry—ravenous, in fact—the appetite struck me as unseemly So I continued to act the part of a w o m a n w h o ' d lost interest in food.

But after about a year, I faced the fact that the theater was wasted. If I grew cadaverous, no one cared. W h a t did I expect, that you would wrap my rib cage with those enormous hands in which horses must be measured, lifting me overhead with the stern reproach that is every Western woman's sly delight, "You're too thin"?

So n o w I eat a croissant with my coffee every morning, picking up every flake with a moistened forefinger. Methodically chopping cabbage occupies a portion of these long evenings. I have even declined, once or twice, those few invitations out that still jangle my phone, usually friends from abroad w h o e-mail from time to time, but w h o m I haven't seen for years. Especially if they don't know, and I can always tell; innocents sound too roisterous, whereas initiates begin with a deferential stutter and a hushed, churchy tone. Obviously I don't want to recite the story. N o r do I covet the m u t e commiseration of friends w h o *don't know what to say* and so leave me to spill my guts by way of making conversation. But w h a t really

drives me to make my apologies about how "busy" I am is that I am terrified we will both order a salad and the bill will arrive and it will only be 8:30

or 9:00 at night and I will go h o m e to my tiny duplex and have nothing to chop.

It's funny, after so long on the road for A W i n g and a Prayer—a different restaurant every night, where waiters speak Spanish or Thai, whose menus list seviche or dog—that I should have grown so fixated on this fierce routine. Horribly, I remind myself of my mother. But I cannot break with this narrow sequence (square of cheese or six to seven olives; breast of chicken, chop, or omelet; hot vegetable; single vanilla sandwich cookie; no more wine than will finish exactly half the bottle) as if I am walking a balance

beam, and with one step off I will topple. I have had to disallow snow peas altogether because their preparation is insufficiently arduous.

Anyway, even with the two of us estranged, I k n e w you would worry about whether I was eating. You always did. Thanks to Mary Woolford's feeble revenge this evening, I am amply fed. N o t all of our neighbors' antics have proved so anodyne.

Those gallons of crimson paint splashed all over the front porch, for example, w h e n I was still living in our nouveau riche ranch house (that's what it was, Franklin, whether or not you like the sound of it—a *ranch house)* on Palisades Parade. Over the windows, the front door. T h e y came in the night, and by the time I woke the next m o r n i n g the paint had almost dried. I thought at the time, only a m o n t h or so after—whatever am I going to call that Thursday?—that I couldn't be horrified anymore, or w o u n d e d .

I suppose that's a c o m m o n conceit, that you've already been so damaged that damage itself, in its totality, makes you safe.

As I turned the corner from the kitchen into the living r o o m that morning, I recognized this notion that I was impervious for codswallop. I gasped. T h e sun was streaming in the windows, or at least through the panes n o t streaked with paint. It also shone through in spots where the paint was thinnest, casting the off-white walls of that r o o m in the lurid red glow of a garish Chinese restaurant.

I'd always made it a policy, one you admired, to face what I feared, though this policy was conceived in days w h e n my fears ran to losing my way in a foreign city—child's play. W h a t I would give n o w to return to the days w h e n I'd no idea what lay in wait *(ichild's play* itself, for example). Still, old habits die hard, so rather than flee back to o u r bed and draw up the covers, I resolved to survey the damage. But the front door stuck, glued shut with thick crimson enamel. Unlike latex, enamel isn't water soluble.

And enamel is expensive, Franklin. Someone made a serious

investment. Of course, our old neighborhood has any n u m b e r of deficiencies, but one of them has never been money.

So I went out the side door and around to the front in my robe. Taking in our neighbors' artwork, I could feel my face set in the same "impassive mask" the *New York Times* described from the trial.The *Post*, less kindly, depicted my expression throughout as "defiant," and our local *Journal News* went even further: " F r o m Eva Khatchadourian's stony implacability, her son might have d o n e nothing more egregious than dip a pigtail in an inkwell." (I grant that I stiffened in court, squinting and sucking my cheeks against my molars; I remember grasping at one of your tough-guy mottoes, " D o n ' t let ' e m see you sweat." But Franklin, "defiant"?

I was trying not to cry.)

T h e effect was quite magnificent, if you had a taste for the sensational, which by that point I certainly didn't. T h e house looked as if its throat were slit. Splashed in wild, gushing Rorschachs, the h u e had been chosen so meticulously—deep, rich, and luscious, with a hint of purplish blue—that it might have been specially mixed. I thought dully that had the culprits requested this color rather than pulled it off the shelf, the police might be able to track t h e m down.

I wasn't about to walk into a police station again unless I had to.

My k i m o n o was thin, the one you gave me for our first anniversary back in 1980. Meant for summer, it was the only wrap I had from you, and I wouldn't reach for anything else. I've thrown so m u c h away, but nothing you gave me or left behind. I admit that these talismans are excruciating. That is why I keep them.

Those bullying therapeutic types would claim that my cluttered closets aren't "healthy." I beg to differ. In contrast to the cringing, dirty pain of Kevin, of the paint, the criminal and civil trials, this pain is *wholesome*. M u c h belittled in the sixties, wholesomeness is a property I have come to appreciate as surprisingly scarce.

T h e point is, clutching that soft blue cotton and assessing the somewhat slapdash paint j o b that our neighbors had seen fit to sponsor free of charge, I was cold. It was May, but crisp, with a whipping wind. Before I f o u n d out for myself, I might have imagined that in the aftermath of personal apocalypse, the little bothers of life would effectively vanish. But it's not true. You still feel chills, you still despair w h e n a package is lost in the mail, and you still feel irked to discover you were shortchanged at Starbucks.

It might seem, in the circumstances, a little embarrassing for me to continue to need a sweater or a muff, or to object to being cheated of a dollar and fifty cents. But since that *Thursday* my whole life has been smothered in such a blanket of embarrassment that I have chosen to find these passing pinpricks solace instead, emblems of a surviving propriety. Being inadequately dressed for the season, or chafing that in a Wal-Mart the size

of a catde market I cannot locate a single box of kitchen matches, I glory in the emotionally commonplace.

Picking my way to the side door again, I puzzled over h o w a band of marauders could have assaulted this structure so thoroughly while I slept unawares inside. I blamed the heavy dose of tranquilizers I was taking every night (please don't say anything, Franklin, I k n o w you don't approve), until I realized that I was picturing the scene all wrong. It was a m o n t h later, not a day.There were no jeers and howls, no ski masks and sawn-ofF

shotguns. T h e y came in stealth. T h e only sounds were broken twigs, a muffled t h u m p as the first full can slapped our lustrous mahogany door, the lulling oceanic lap of paint against glass, a tiny rat-a-tat-tat as spatters splattered, no louder than fat rain.

O u r house had not been spurted with the Day-Glo spray of spontaneous outrage but slathered with a hatred that had reduced until it was thick and savorous, like a fine French sauce.

You'd have insisted we hire someone else to clean it off.

You were always keen on this splendid American penchant for specialization, whereby there was an expert for every want, and you sometimes thumbed the Yellow Pages just for fun. "Paint Removers: Crimson enamel." But so m u c h was made in the papers about h o w rich we were, h o w Kevin had been spoiled. I

didn't want to give Gladstone the satisfaction of sneering, look, she can just hire one more minion to clean up the mess, like that expensive lawyer. No, I made t h e m watch me day after day, scraping by hand, renting a sandblaster for the bricks. O n e evening I glimpsed my reflection after a day's toil—clothing smeared, fingernails creased, hair flecked—and shrieked. I'd looked like this once before.

A few crevices around the door may still gleam with a ruby tint; deep in the crags of those faux-antique bricks may yet glisten a few drops of spite that I was unable to reach with the ladder. I wouldn't know. I sold that house. After the civil trial, I had to.

I had expected to have trouble unloading the property. Surely superstitious buyers would shy away w h e n they found out w h o owned the place. But that just goes to show once again h o w poorly I understood my own country. You once accused me of lavishing all my curiosity on "Third World shitholes," while what was arguably the most extraordinary empire in the history of mankind was staring me in the face. You were right, Franklin.

There's no place like home.

As soon as the property was listed, the bids tumbled in. N o t because the bidders didn't know; because they did. O u r house sold for well more than it was worth—over $3 million. In my naivete, I hadn't grasped that the property's very notoriety was its selling point. W h i l e poking about our pantry, apparently couples on the climb were picturing gleefully in their minds' eyes the crowning m o m e n t of their housewarming dinner party.

[Ting-ting!] Listen up, folks. I'm gonna propose a toast, but first, you're not gonna believe who we bought this spread from. Ready?

Eva Khatchadourian.. .*Familiar? You bet. Where'd we move to, anyway? Gladstone!... Yeah,* that *Khatchadourian, Pete, among all the Khatchadourians you know? Christ, guy, little slow.*

... That's right, "Kevin. "Wild, huh? My kid Lawrence has his room.

Tried one on the other night, too. Said he had to stay up with me to watch H e n r y : Portrait of a Serial Killer *because his room was "haunted"*

by "Kevin Ketchup." Had to disappoint the kid. Sorry, I said, Kevin Ketchup can't no way be haunting your bedroom when the worthless little bastard's all too alive and well in some kiddie prison upstate. Up to me, man, that scumbag would'vegot the chair. ..No, it wasn't quite as bad as Columbine. What was it, ten, honey? Nine, right, seven kids, two adults.

The teacher he whacked was like, this brat's big champion or something, too. And I don't know about blaming videos, rock music. We grew up with rock music, didn't we? None of us went on some killing frenzy at our high school. Or take Lawrence. That little guy loves blood-and-guts TV, and no matter how graphic he doesn't flinch. But his rabbit got run over?

He cried for a week. They know the difference.

We're raising him to know what's right. Maybe it seems unfair, but you really gotta wonder about the parents.

N O V E M B E R 1 5 , 2 0 0 0

Dear Franklin,

You know, I try to be polite. So w h e n my coworkers—that's right, I work, at a Nyack travel agency, believe it or not, and gratefully, t o o — w h e n they start foaming at the m o u t h about the disproportionate n u m b e r of votes for Pat Buchanan in Palm Beach, I wait so patiently for t h e m to finish that in a way I have b e c o m e a treasured commodity: I am the only one in the office w h o will allow t h e m to finish a sentence. If the atmosphere of this country has suddenly b e c o m e carnival-like, festive with fierce opinion, I do not feel invited to the party. I don't care who's president.

Yet too vividly I can see this last w e e k through the lens of my private if-only. I would have voted for Gore, you for Bush.

We'd have had heated enough exchanges before the election, but this—this—oh, it would have been marvelous. Loud, strident fist pounding and door

slamming, me reciting choice snippets f r o m the *New York Times*, you furiously underscoring op-eds in the *Wall Street Journal*—suppressing smiles the whole time. H o w I miss getting exercised over bagatelle.

It may have been disingenuous of me to imply at the start of my last letter that w h e n we conferred at the end of a day, I told all.To the contrary, one of the things that impels me to write is that my m i n d is huge with all the little stories I never told you.

— 1 3 —

D o n ' t imagine that I've enjoyed my secrets. They've trapped me, crowded me in, and long ago I'd have liked nothing more than to pour out my heart. But Franklin, you didn't want to hear.

I ' m sure you still don't. A n d maybe I should have tried harder at the time to force you to listen, but early on we got on opposite sides of something. For many couples w h o quarrel, just what they are on opposite sides of may be unformed, a line of some sort, an abstraction that divides them—a history or floating grudge, an insensible power struggle with a life of its own: gossamer. Perhaps in times of reconciliation for such couples the unreality of that line assists its dissolve. *Look,* I can jealously see t h e m noting, *there is nothing in the room; we can reach across the sheer air between us.* But in our case, w h a t separated us was all too tangible, and if it wasn't in the r o o m it could walk in of its o w n accord.

O u r son. W h o is not a smattering of small tales but one long one. A n d though the natural impulse of yarn spinners is to begin at the beginning, I will resist it. I have to go further back. So many stories are determined before they start.

What possessed us? We were so happy! Why, then, did we take the stake of all we had and place it all on this outrageous gamble of having a child? Of course you consider the very putting of that question profane. Although the infertile are entitled to sour grapes, it's against the rules, isn't it, to actually have a baby and spend any time at all on that banished parallel life in which

you didn't. But a Pandoran perversity draws me to prize open what is forbidden. I have an imagination, and I like to dare myself. I k n e w this about myself in advance, too: that I was just the sort of w o m a n w h o had the capacity, however ghastly, to rue even so unretractable a matter as another person. But then, Kevin didn't regard other people's existence as unretractable—did he?

I ' m sorry, but you can't expect me to avoid it. I may not k n o w what to call it, that *Thursday. The atrocity* sounds t o r n from a newspaper, *the incident* is minimizing to the point of obscenity, and *the day our own son committed mass murder* is too long, isn't it?

For every mention? But I am going to mention it. I wake up with

what he did every m o r n i n g and I go to bed with it every night.

It is my shabby substitute for a husband.

So I have racked my brain, trying to reconstruct those few months in 1982 w h e n we were officially "deciding."We were still living in my cavernous loft inTribeca, where we were surrounded by arch homosexuals, unattached artists you deplored as "self-indulgent," and unencumbered professional couples w h o dined out a t T e x - M e x nightly and flopped about at the Limelight until 3 A.M. Children in that neighborhood were pretty m u c h on a par with the spotted owl and other endangered species, so it's little w o n d e r that our deliberations were stilted and abstract. We even set ourselves a deadline, for pity's sake—my thirty-seventh birthday that August—since we didn't want a child w h o could still be living at h o m e in our sixties.

O u r sixties! In those days, an age as bafflingly theoretical as a baby. Yet I expect to embark to that foreign land five years from n o w with no m o r e ceremony than boarding a city bus. It was in 1999 that I made a temporal leap, although I didn't notice the aging so m u c h in the mirror as through the aegis of other people.

W h e n I renewed my driver's license this last January, for example, the functionary at the desk didn't act surprised I was all of fifty-four, and you remember I was once rather spoiled on this front, accustomed to regular coos over h o w I looked at least ten years younger. T h e coos came to a complete halt overnight. Indeed, I had one embarrassing encounter, soon after *Thursday*, in which a Manhattan subway attendant called my attention to the fact that over-sixty-fives qualified for a senior discount.

We'd agreed that whether we became parents would be "the single most important decision we would ever make together."

Yet the very momentousness of the decision guaranteed that it never seemed real, and so remained on the level of whimsy. Every time one of us raised the question of parenthood, I felt like a seven-year-old contemplating a Thumbellina that wets itself for Christmas.

I do recall a sequence of conversations during that period that lurched with a seemingly arbitrary rhythm between tending toward and tending against. T h e most upbeat of these has surely to be after a Sunday lunch with Brian and Louise on Riverside Drive. T h e y no longer did dinner, w h i c h always resulted in parental apartheid: one spouse playing grown-up with calamatas and cabernet, the other corralling, bathing, and bedding those two rambunctious little girls. Me, I always prefer socializing at night—it is implicidy more wanton—although wantonness was no longer a quality I would have associated with that warm, settled H o m e Box Office scriptwriter w h o made his o w n pasta and watered spindly parsley plants on his w i n d o w ledge.

I marveled in the elevator down, " A n d he used to be such a cokehead."

"You sound wistful," you noted.

" O h , I ' m sure he's happier now."

I wasn't sure. In those days I still held wholesomeness to be suspect. In fact, we had had a very "nice" time, which left me bafflingly bereft. I had admired the solid oak dining set seized for a song from an upstate tag sale, while you submitted to a complete inventory of the younger girl's Cabbage

Patch Kids with a patience that left me agog. We c o m m e n d e d the inventive salad with ingenuous fervor, for in the early 1980s goat cheese and sun-dried tomatoes were not yet passe.

Years before we'd agreed that you and Brian wouldn't get into it over R o n a l d R e a g a n — t o you, a g o o d - h u m o r e d icon with easy flash and fiscal ingenuity w h o had restored pride to the nation; to Brian, a figure of menacing idiocy w h o would bankrupt the country with tax cuts for rich people. So we stayed on safe topics, as "Ebony and Ivory" crooned in the background at a grown-up volume and I suppressed my annoyance that the little girls kept singing tunelessly along and replaying the same track. You bewailed the fact that the Knicks hadn't made the playoffs, and Brian did an impressive imitation of a m a n w h o was interested in sports. We were all disappointed that *All in the Family* would soon wrap up its last season, but agreed that the show was about played

out. About the only conflict that arose all afternoon was over the equally terminal fate of M * A * S * H . Well aware that Brian worshiped him, you savaged Alan Alda as a "sanctimonious pill."

Yet the difference was dismayingly good-natured. Brian had a blind spot about Israel, and I was tempted to plant one quiet reference to "Judeo-Nazis" and detonate this affable occasion.

Instead I asked him about the subject of his n e w script, but never got a proper answer because the older girl got chewing g u m in her Barbie-blond hair. There was a long maunder about solvents, which Brian put an end to by lopping off the lock with a carving knife, and Louise got a litde upset. But that was the single set-piece commotion, and otherwise no one drank too m u c h or took offense; their h o m e was nice, the food was nice, the girls were nice— nice, nice, *nice.*

I disappointed myself by finding our perfectly pleasant lunch with perfecdy pleasant people inadequate. W h y would I have preferred a fight? Weren't

those two girls captivating as could be, so what did it matter that they were eternally interrupting and I had not for the whole afternoon been able to finish a thought?

Wasn't I married to a m a n I loved, so w h y did something wicked in me wish that Brian had slipped his hand up my skirt w h e n I helped h i m bring in bowls of Haagen-Dazs from the kitchen? In retrospect, I was quite right to kick myself, too. Just a few years later I'd have paid m o n e y for an ordinary, good-spirited family gathering during w h i c h the worst thing any of the children got up to was sticking g u m in their hair.

You, however, announced boisterously in the lobby, "That was great. I think they're both terrific. We should be sure to have t h e m over soon, if they can get a sitter."

I held my tongue. You w o u l d have no time for my nit-picking about h o w wasn't the l u n c h e o n a little bland, didn't you have this feeling like, what's the point, isn't there something flat and plain and doughy about this w h o l e *Father Knows Best* routine w h e n Brian was once (at last I can admit to a guest-r o o m quickie at a party before you and I met) such a hellraiser.

It's quite possible that you felt exactly as I did, that this to all appearances successful encounter had felt d u m p y and insipid to you as well, b u t in lieu of another obvious m o d e l to aspire t o —we were n o t going to go score a gram of cocaine—you t o o k refuge in denial. These were g o o d people and they had b e e n g o o d to us and we had therefore had a *good time.* To conclude otherwise was frightening, raising the specter of some u n -

namable quantity w i t h o u t w h i c h we could n o t abide, but w h i c h we could n o t s u m m o n on demand, least of all by proceeding in virtuous accordance with an established formula.

You regarded redemption as an act of will. You disparaged people (people like me) for their cussedly nonspecific dissatisfactions, because to fail to embrace the simple fineness of being alive betrayed a weakness of character. You always hated finicky eaters, hypochondriacs, and snobs w h o turn up their noses at *Terms of Endearment* just because it was popular. Nice eats, nice place, nice folks—what more could I possibly want?

Besides, the good life doesn't knock on the door. Joy is a job. So if you believed with sufficient industry that we had had a good time with Brian and Louise in theory, then we would have had a good time in fact. T h e only hint that in truth you'd found our afternoon laborious was that your enthusiasm was excessive.

As we spun through the revolving doors onto Riverside Drive, I'm sure my disquiet was u n f o r m e d and fleeting. Later these thoughts would come back to haunt me, though I could not have anticipated that your compulsion to manhandle your unruly, misshapen experience into a tidy box, like someone trying to cram a wild tangle of driftwood into a hard-shell Samsonite suitcase, as well as this sincere confusion of the *is* with the *ought to be*—your heartrending tendency to mistake what you actually had for what you desperately w a n t e d — w o u l d produce such devastating consequences.

I proposed that we walk home. On the road for A W i n g and a Prayer I walked everywhere, and the impulse was second nature.

"It must be six or seven miles t o T r i b e c a P ' y o u objected.

"You'll take a taxi in order to j u m p rope 7,500 times in front of the Knicks game, but a vigorous walk that gets you where you're going is too exhausting."

"Hell, yes. Everything in its place." Limited to exercise or the strict way you folded your shirts, your regimens were adorable.

But in more serious contexts, Franklin, I was less charmed.

Orderliness readily slides to conformity over time.

So I threatened to walk h o m e by myself, and that did it; I was leaving for Sweden three days later, and you were greedy for my company. We roistered d o w n the footpath into Riverside Park, where the ginkgoes were in flower, and the sloping lawn was littered with anorexics doing tai chi. Ebullient over getting away from my own friends, I stumbled.

"You're a drunk," you said.

"Two glasses!"

You tsked. "Middle of the day."

"I should have made it three," I said sharply. Your every pleasure rationed except *television,* I wished that sometimes you would let go, as you had in our salad days of courtship, arriving at my door with two pinot noirs, a six of St. Pauli Girl, and a lecherous leer that did not promise to hold off until we'd flossed.

"Brian's kids," I introduced formally. " T h e y make you want one?"

" M - m - m a y b e . They're cute. Then, I ' m not the one w h o has to stuff the beasties in the sack w h e n they want a cracker, Mr.

Bunnikins, and 5 million drinks of water."

I understood. These talks of ours had a gameliness, and your opening play was noncommittal. O n e of us always got lodged into the role of parental party pooper, and I had rained on the progeny parade in our previous session: A child was loud, messy, constraining, and ungrateful. This time I bid for the more daring role: "At least if I got pregnant, something would *happen."*

"Obviously," you said dryly. "You'd have a baby."

I dragged you down the walkway to the riverfront. "I like the idea of turning the page is all."

— 19 —

" T h a t was inscrutable."

"I mean, we're happy? Wouldn't you say?"

"Sure," you concurred cautiously. "I guess so." For you, our contentment didn't bear scrutiny—as if it were a skittish bird, easily startled, and the m o m e n t one of us cried out *Look at that beautiful swan!* it would fly away.

"Well, maybe we're too happy."

"Yeah, I've been meaning to talk to you about that. I wish you could make me a little more miserable."

"Stop it. I ' m talking about story. In fairy tales,'And they lived happily ever after' is the last line."

" D o me a favor: Talk d o w n to me."

O h , you k n e w exacdy what I meant. N o t that happiness is dull. O n l y that it doesn't tell well. A n d one of our consuming diversions as we age is to recite, not only to others but to ourselves, our o w n story. I should know; I am in flight from my story every day, and it dogs me like a faithful stray. Accordingly, the one respect in which I depart from my younger self is that I n o w regard those people w h o have little or no story to tell themselves as terribly fortunate.

We slowed by the tennis courts in the blaze of April sunlight, pausing to admire a powerful slice backhand through a gap in the green mesh windbreaks. "Everything seems so sorted out,"

I lamented. "A W i n g and a Prayer has taken off so that the only thing that could really *happen* to me professionally is for the company to go belly-up.

I could always make more m o n e y — b u t I ' m a thrift-shop junkie, Franklin, and I don't k n o w what to do with it. M o n e y bores me, and it's starting to change the way we live in a way I'm not totally comfortable with. Plenty of people don't have a kid because they can't afford one. For me it would a relief to find something of consequence to spend it on."

" I ' m n o t of consequence?"

"You don't want enough."

" N e w j u m p rope?"

"Ten bucks."

— 2 0 —

"Well," you conceded, "at least a kid would answer the Big Question."

I could be perverse, too. " W h a t big question?"

"You know," you said lightly, and drew out with an emcee drawl, "the old *e-e-existential* dilemma."

I did not put my finger on why, but your Big Question left me unmoved. I far preferred my *turn of the page.* "I could always traipse off to a new c o u n t r y — "

"Any left? You go through countries the way most folks go through socks."

"Russia," I noted. "But I ' m not, for once, threatening to ransom my life to Aeroflot. Because lately...everywhere seems kind of the same. Countries all have different food, but they all *have food,* k n o w what I mean?"

" W h a t do you call that? Right! Codswallop."

See, you'd a habit back then of pretending to have no idea what I was talking about if what I was getting at was at all complicated or subtle. Later

this playing-dumb strategy, w h i c h began as gentle teasing, warped into a darker incapacity to grasp what I was getting at not because it was abstruse but because it was all too clear and you didn't want it to be so.

Allow me, then, to elucidate: Countries all have different weather, but they all have weather of some sort, architecture of some sort, a disposition toward burping at the dinner table that regards it as flattering or rude. Hence, I had begun to attend less to whether one was expected to leave one's sandals at the d o o r in Morocco than to the constant that, wherever I was, its culture would have a custom about shoes. It seemed a great deal of trouble to go to—checking baggage, adapting to n e w time zones—only to remain stuck on the old weather-shoes continuum; the continuum itself had come to feel like a location of sorts, thereby landing me relentlessly in the same place. Nevertheless, though I would sometimes rant about globalization—I could n o w buy your favorite chocolate-brown Stove brogans from Banana Republic in Bangkok—what had really grown m o n o t o n o u s was

the world in my head, what I thought and h o w I felt and what I said. T h e only way my head was going truly somewhere else was to travel to a different life and not to a different airport.

"Motherhood," I condensed in the park. "Now, that is a foreign country."

On those rare occasions w h e n it seemed as if I might really want to *do it,* you got nervous. "You may be self-satisfied with your success," you said. "Location scouting for Madison Avenue ad clients hasn't brought me to an orgasm of self-actualization."

"All right." I stopped, leaned on the w a r m w o o d e n rail that fenced the Hudson, and extended my arms on either side to face you squarely. "What's going to *happen,* then? To you, professionally, what are we waiting and hoping for?"

You waggled your head, searching my face. You seemed to discern that I was not trying to impugn your achievements or the importance of your work. This was about something else. "I could scout for feature films instead."

"But you've always said that's the same j o b : You find the canvas, someone else paints the scene. And ads pay better."

"Married to Mrs. Moneybags, that doesn't matter."

"It does to you." Your maturity about my vastly outearning you had its limits.

"I've considered trying something else altogether."

"So, what, you'll get all fired up to start your own restaurant?"

You smiled. " T h e y never make it."

"Exactly. You're too practical. Maybe you will do something different, but it'll be pretty m u c h on the same *plane.* A n d I ' m talking about topography. Emotional, narrative topography. We live in Holland. And sometimes I get a hankering for Nepal."

Since other N e w Yorkers were so driven, you could have been injured that I didn't regard you as ambitious. B u t one of the things you were practical about was yourself, and you didn't take offense. You were ambitious— for your life, what it was like w h e n you woke up in the morning, and not for some attainment.

Like most people w h o did not answer a particular calling from an

early age, you placed work beside yourself; any occupation would fill up your day but not your heart. I liked that about you. I liked it enormously.

We started walking again, and I swung your hand. " O u r parents will die soon," I resumed. "In fact, one by one everyone we k n o w will start pitching their mortal coils in the drink. We'll get old, and at some point you're losing more friends than you make. Sure, we can go on holidays, finally giving in to suitcases with wheelies.We can eat more foods and slug more wines and have more sex. But—and don't take this w r o n g — I ' m worried that it all starts getting a little tired."

" O n e of us could always get pancreatic cancer," you said pleasantly.

"Yeah. Or run your pickup into a concrete mixer, and the plot thickens. But that's my point. Everything I can think of happening to us from n o w o n — n o t , you know, we get an affectionate postcard from France, but really happen-happen—is awful."

You kissed my hair. "Pretty morbid for such a gorgeous day."

For a few steps we walked in a half embrace, but our strides clashed; I settled for hooking your belt loop with my forefinger.

"You k n o w that euphemism, *she's expecting*? It's apt.The birth of a baby, so long as it's healthy, is something to look forward to. It's a good thing, a big, good, huge event. A n d from thereon in, every good thing that happens to them happens to you, too. Of course, bad things, too," I added hurriedly, "but also, you know, first steps, first dates, first places in sack races. Kids, they graduate, they marry, they have kids themselves—in a way, you get to do everything twice. Even if our kid had problems," I supposed idiotically, "at least they wouldn't be our same old problems..."

E n o u g h . R e c o u n t i n g this dialogue is breaking my heart.

Looking back, maybe my saying that I wanted more "story" was all by way of alluding to the fact that I wanted someone else to love. We never said such things outright; we were too shy. And I was nervous of ever intimating that you weren't enough for me.

In fact, n o w that we're parted I wish I had overcome my o w n bashfulness and had told you more often h o w falling in love with you was the most

astonishing thing that ever happened to me. N o t just the falling, either, the trite and finite part, but being in love.

Every day we spent apart, I would conjure that wide w a r m chest of yours, its pectoral hillocks firm and mounded from your daily 100

pushups, the clavicle valley into which I could nesde the crown of my head on those glorious mornings that I did not have to catch a plane. Sometimes I would hear you call my name from around a corner—"Ee-VA!"—often irascible, curt, demanding, calling me to heel because I was yours, like a *dog,* Franklin! But I was yours and I didn't resent it and I wanted you to make that claim:

"Eeeeeee-VAH!" always the emphasis on the second syllable, and there were some evenings I could hardly answer because my throat had closed with a rising lump. I would have to stop slicing apples for a crumble at the counter because a film had formed over my eyes and the kitchen had gone all liquid and wobbly and if I kept on slicing I would cut myself. You always shouted at me w h e n I cut myself, it made you furious, and the irrationality of that anger would almost beguile me into doing it again.

I never, ever took you for granted. We met too late for that; I was nearly thirty-three by then, and my past without you was too stark and insistent for me to find the miracle of companionship ordinary. But after I'd survived for so long on the scraps from my own emotional table, you spoiled me with a daily banquet of complicitous what-an-asshole looks at parties, surprise bouquets for no occasion, and fridge-magnet notes that always signed off

" X X X X , Franklin.'You made me greedy. Like any addict w o r t h his salt, I wanted more. And I was curious. I wondered h o w it felt w h e n it was a piping voice calling, " M o m m - M E E E ? " from around that same corner.You started it—like someone w h o gives you a gift of a single carved ebony elephant, and suddenly you get this idea that it might be f u n to start a *collection.*

P.S. (3:40 A.M.)

I've been trying to go cold turkey on sleeping pills, if only because I k n o w you'd disapprove of my using them. But without the pills I keep tossing. I'll be worthless at Travel R Us tomorrow, but I wanted to get d o w n another m e m o r y from that period.

R e m e m b e r having soft-shell crabs with Eileen and Belmont at the loft? That evening *was* wanton. Even you threw caution to the winds and lurched up for the raspberry brandy at 2 A.M. W i t h no interruptions to admire dolly outfits, no t o m o r r o w is a *school day,* we gorged on fruit and sorbet and splashed immoderate second shots of clear, heady framboise, w h o o p i n g at each others'

top-this tales in the orgy of eternal adolescence characteristic of the childless in middle age.

We all talked about our parents—rather to their collective detriment, I ' m afraid. We staged an unofficial contest of sorts: whose parents were the most bonkers.You were at a disadvantage; your parents' uninflected N e w England stoicism was difficult to parody. By contrast, my mother's ingenious contrivances for avoiding leaving the house made for great hilarity, and I even managed to explain the private j o k e b e t w e e n me and my brother Giles about "It's very convenient"—the catchphrase in our family for " T h e y deliver." In those days (before he was reluctant to let his children anywhere near me), I had only to say "It's very convenient" to Giles, and he guffawed. By the w e e -

smalls I could say "It's very *convenient"* to Eileen and B e l m o n t and they cracked up, too.

Neither of us could compete with that interracial vaudeville team of been-around-the-block bohemians. Eileen's mother was schizophrenic, her father a professional cardsharp; Belmont's mother was a former prostitute w h o still dressed like Bette Davis in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* and his father was a semifamous jazz d r u m m e r w h o had played with Dizzy Gillespie.

I sensed that they'd told these stories before, but as a consequence they told t h e m very well, and after so m u c h chardonnay to wash d o w n a feast of crabs I laughed until I wept. O n c e I considered

bending the conversation toward this monstrous decision you and I were trying to make, but Eileen and Belmont were at least ten years older, and I wasn't sure childless by choice; raising the matter might have been unkind.

They didn't leave until almost 4 A.M. And make no mistake: On this occasion I'd had a wonderful time. It was one of those rare evenings that had proved worth the bustle of rushing to the fish market and chopping all that fruit, and that should even have been worth cleaning up the kitchen, dusty with dredging flour and sticky with mango peel. I could see being a little let down that the night was over, or a little heavy with too much booze, whose giddy effects had peaked, leaving only an unsteadiness on my feet and a difficulty in focusing w h e n I needed to concentrate on not dropping the wine glasses. But that wasn't why I felt dolorous.

"So quiet," you noticed, stacking plates. "Beat?"

I noshed on a lone crab claw that had fallen off in the skillet.

"We must have spent what, four, five hours, talking about our parents."

"So? If you feel guilty about bad-mouthing your mother, you're looking at penance until 2025. It's one of your favorite sports."

"I know it is.That's what bothers me."

"She couldn't hear you. And no one around that table assumed that because you think she's funny you don't also think she's tragic. Or that you don't love her."You added, "In your way."

"But when she dies, we won't, I won't be able to carry on like that. It won't be possible to be so scathing, not without feeling traitorous."

"Pillory the poor woman while you can, then."

"But should we be talking about our parents, for hours, at this age?"

"What's the problem? You were laughing so hard you must have wet yourself."

"I had this image, after they left—the four of us, all in our

eighties with liver spots, still boozing it up, still telling the same stories. Maybe tinged with affection or regret since they'd be dead, but still talking about weird M o m and Dad. Isn't it a little pathetic?"

"You'd rather anguish over El Salvador."

"It's not t h a t — "

" — O r dole out cultural after-dinner mints: Belgians are rude, Thais disapprove of groping in public, and Germans are obsessed with shit."

T h e tinge of bitterness in such jibes had been on the increase.

My hard-won anthropological nuggets apparendy served as reminders that I'd gone on an adventure abroad while you were searching suburban N e w Jersey for a tumbledown garage for Black and Decker. I might have snapped that I was sorry my travel stories bored you, but you were mostly teasing, it was late, and I wasn't in the m o o d to scrap.

" D o n ' t be silly," I said. " I ' m like everyone else: I love to talk about other people. N o t *peoples.* People I know, people close to m e — p e o p l e w h o drive me crazy. B u t I feel as if I ' m using my family up. My father was killed before I was b o r n ; one brother and o n e m o m make for pretty slim pickings. Honestly, Franklin, maybe we should have a kid just to have something else to talk about."

" N o w *that,"* you clanged the spinach pan in the sink, "is frivolous."

I stayed your hand. "It's not. W h a t we talk about is what we think about, is what our lives are about. I ' m not sure I want to spend mine looking over my shoulder at a generation whose lineage I ' m personally helping to truncate. There's something nihilistic about not having children, Franklin. As if you don't believe in the w h o l e h u m a n *thing.* If everyone followed our lead, the species would disappear in a hundred years."

" G e t out," you jeered. " N o b o d y has kids to perpetuate the species."

"Maybe not consciously. But it's only been since about 1960 that we've been able to decide without joining a nunnery.

Besides, after nights like this, there might be poetic justice in having grown kids talking for hours to their friends about *me!'*

H o w we shelter ourselves! For the prospect of such scrutiny clearly appealed to me. *Wasn't Mom pretty? Wasn't Mom brave?*

Gosh, she went to all those scary countries all by herself! These flashes of my children's late-night meditations on their mother were gauzy with the very adoration so signally absent from my savage dissection of my o w n mother. Try, *Isn't Mom pretentious? Isn't her nose huge? And those travel guides she grinds out are sooooo booooooring.*

Worse, the deadly accuracy of filial faultfinding is facilitated by access, by trust, by willing disclosure, and so constitutes a double betrayal.

Yet even in retrospect this craving for "something else to talk about" seems far from frivolous. Indeed, I may have first been enticed into the notion of giving pregnancy a go by these tempting little imaginative packages like movie previews: of opening the front door to the boy on w h o m my daughter (I confess I always imagined a daughter) has her first crush, soothing his awkwardness with easy banter, and assessing h i m endlessly—playfully, ruthlessly—once he is gone. My yearning to stay up late with Eileen and Belmont for once ruminating about young people whose lives lay before t h e m — w h o made *new* stories, about which I would have

new opinions, and whose fabric was not threadbare from retelling—was real enough, it wasn't flip.

O h , but it never entered my head what, once I was finally provided my coveted fresh subject matter, I would have to say.

M u c h less could I foresee the aching O. H e n r y irony that in lighting u p o n my consuming new topic of conversation, I would lose the man that I most wanted to talk to.

— 28 —

NOVEMBER. 2 8 , 2 0 0 0

Dear Franklin,

This carnival in Florida shows no signs of picking up stakes.

T h e office is up in arms about some state official w h o wears a lot of makeup, and a number of my overwrought coworkers are predicting a "constitutional crisis." Although I haven't followed the details, I doubt that. W h a t strikes me as people in diners rail at each other at the counter w h e n before they ate in silence is not h o w imperiled they feel, but h o w safe. O n l y a country that feels invulnerable can afford political turmoil as entertainment.

But having come so close to extermination within living m e m o r y (I k n o w you're tired of hearing about it), few Armenian Americans share their compatriots' smug sense of security. T h e very numerics of my own life are apocalyptic. I was b o r n in August 1945, w h e n the spoors of two poisonous mushrooms gave us all a cautionary foretaste of hell. Kevin himself was b o r n during the anxious countdown to 1984—much feared, you'll recall; though I scoffed at folks w h o took George Orwell's arbitrary title to heart, those digits did usher in an era of tyranny for me. *Thursday* itself took place in 1999, a year widely m o o t e d beforehand as the end of the world. And wasn't it.

Since I last wrote, I've been rooting around in my mental attic for my original reservations about motherhood. I do recall a tumult of fears, though all the w r o n g ones. Had I catalogued

the downsides of parenthood, "son might turn out killer" would never have turned up on the list. Rather, it might have looked something like this:

1. Hassle.

2. Less time just the two of us. (Try no time just the two of us.) 3. O t h e r people. (PTA meetings. Ballet teachers. T h e kid's insufferable friends and their insufferable parents.) 4. Turning into a cow. (I was slight, and preferred to stay that way. My sister-in-law had developed bulging varicose veins in her legs during pregnancy that never retreated, and the prospect of calves branched in blue tree roots mortified me more than I could say. So I didn't say. I am vain, or once was, and one of my vanities was to feign that I was not.) 5. Unnatural altruism: being forced to make decisions in accordance with what was best for someone else. (I'm a pig.) 6. Curtailment of my traveling. (Note *curtailment.* N o t *conclusion.)* 7. D e m e n t i n g boredom. (I found small children brutally dull. I did, even at the outset, admit this to myself.)

8. Worthless social life. (I had never had a decent conversation with a friend's five-year-old in the room.)

9. Social demotion. (I was a respected entrepreneur. O n c e I had a toddler in tow, every m a n I knew—-every woman, too, which is depressing—would take me less seriously.)

10. Paying the piper. (Parenthood repays a debt. But w h o wants to pay a debt she can escape? Apparently, the childless get away with something sneaky. Besides, w h a t good is repaying a debt to the wrong party? Only the most warped mother could feel rewarded for her trouble by the fact that at last her daughter's life is hideous, too.)

Those, as best I can recall, are the pygmy misgivings I weighed beforehand, and I've tried not to contaminate their dumbfounding naivete with what actually happened. Clearly, the reasons to remain barren—and what a devastating word—were all petty inconveniences and trifling sacrifices. They were selfish and mean and small-minded, so that anyone compiling such a catalogue w h o still chose to retain her tidy, airless, static, dead-end, desiccated family-free life was not only short-sighted but a terrible person.

Yet as I contemplate that list n o w it strikes me that, however damning, the conventional reservations about parenthood are practical. After all, n o w that children don't till your fields or take you in w h e n you're incontinent, there is no sensible reason to have them, and it's amazing that with the advent of effective contraception anyone chooses to reproduce at all. By contrast, love, story, content, faith in the h u m a n " t h i n g " — t h e m o d e r n incentives are like dirigibles, immense, floating, and few; optimistic, large-hearted, even profound, but ominously ungrounded.

For years I'd been awaiting that overriding urge I'd always heard about, the narcotic pining that draws childless w o m e n ineluctably to strangers' strollers in parks. I wanted to be drowned by the hormonal imperative, to wake one day and throw my arms around your neck, reach d o w n for you, and pray that while that black flower bloomed behind my eyes you had just left me with child. (*With child:* There's a lovely w a r m sound to that expression, an archaic but tender acknowledgment that for nine months you have company wherever you go. *Pregnant*, by contrast, is heavy and bulging and always sounds to my ear like bad news: " I ' m *pregnant*." I instinctively picture a sixteen-year-old at the dinner table—pale, unwell, with a scoundrel of a boyfriend—forcing herself to blurt out her mother's deepest fear.)

Whatever the trigger, it never entered my system, and that made me feel cheated. W h e n I hadn't gone into maternal heat by my mid-thirties, I worried that there was something w r o n g with me, something missing. By the time I gave birth to Kevin at thirty-seven, I had begun to anguish over whether, by not simply accepting this defect, I had amplified an incidental, perhaps merely chemical deficiency into a flaw of Shakespearean proportions.

So what finally pulled me off the fence? You, for starters. For if *we* were happy, you weren't, not quite, and I must have known that. There was a hole in your life that I couldn't quite fill. You had work, and it suited you. Nosing into undiscovered stables and armories, searching out a field that had to be edged with a split-rail fence and sport a cherry-red silo and black-and-white cows (Kraft—whose cheese-food slices were made with "real milk"), you made your own hours, your own vista. You liked location scouting. But you didn't love it. Your passion was for people, Franklin. So w h e n I saw you playing with Brian's children, nuzzling them with monkey puppets and admiring their wash-off tattoos, I yearned to provide you opportunity for the ardor that I myself once found in A Wing and a Prayer—or, as you would say,AWAP.

I remember once you tried to express, haltingly, what was not like you; not the sentiment, not the language. You were always uncomfortable with the rhetoric of emotion, which is quite a different matter from discomfort with emotion itself.You feared that too much examination could bruise the feelings, like the well-meaning but brutish handling of a salamander by big, clumsy hands.

We were in bed, still in that vaultingTribeca loft whose creaky handworked elevator was forever breaking down. Cavernous, sifting with dust, undifferentiated into civilized cubicles with end tables, the loft always reminded me of the private hideout my brother and I had fashioned from corrugated iron in Racine.You and I had made love, and I was just swooning off into sleep when I sat bolt upright. I had to catch a plane for Madrid in ten hours'

time and had forgotten to set the alarm. Once I'd adjusted the clock, I noticed you were on your back.Your eyes were open.

"What is it?"

You sighed. "I don't know how you do it." As I nestled back to bask in another paean to my amazing adventurousness and courage, you must have sensed my mistake, for you added hastily,

"Leave. Leave all the time for so long. Leave *me."*

— 3 2 —

"But I don't like to."

"I wonder."

"Franklin, I didn't contrive my company to escape your clutches. Don't forget, it predates you."

" O h , I could hardly forget that."

"It's my job!"

"It doesn't have to be."

I sat up. "Are you—"

" I ' m not."You pressed me gently back down; this was not going as you planned, and you had, I could tell, planned it.

You rolled over to place your elbows on either side of me and touched your forehead, briefly, to mine. " I ' m not trying to take your series away. I know how much it means to you. That's the trouble. T h e other way around, I couldn't do it. I couldn't get up tomorrow to fly to Madrid and try to discourage you from meeting me at the airport three weeks later. Maybe once or twice. N o t over and over."

"You could if you had to."

"Eva.You know and I know.You don't have to."

I twisted.You were so close up; I felt hot, and, between your elbows, caged. "We've been through this—"

" N o t often. Your travel guides are a runaway success. You could hire college students to do all the grubbing around in flophouses that you do yourself. They already do most of your research, don't they?"

I was vexed; I'd been through this. "If I don't keep tabs on them, they cheat. They say they've confirmed that a listing is still good, and don't bother and go get slammed. Later it turns out the B&B has changed hands and is riddled with lice, or it's moved to a new location. I get complaints from cross-country cyclists w h o have ridden a hundred miles to find an insurance office instead of a hard-earned bed. They're furious, as they should be.

And without the boss lady looking over their shoulder, some of those students will take kickbacks. AWAP's most valuable asset is its reputation —"

— 3 3

"You could hire someone else to do spot checks, too. So you're going to Madrid tomorrow because you want to.There's nothing awful about that except that I wouldn't, and I couldn't.You k n o w that w h e n you're gone I think about you all the time? On the h o u r I think about what you're eating, w h o you're m e e t i n g — "

"But I think about you, too!"

You laughed, and the chuckle was congenial; you weren't trying to pick a fight. You released me, rolling onto your back.

"Horseshit, Eva.You think about whether the falafel stand on the corner will last through the next update, and h o w to describe the color of the sky. Fine. But in that case, you must feel differently about me than I do about you.That's all I ' m getting at."

"Are you seriously claiming that I don't love you as much?"

"You don't love me in the same way. It has nothing to do with degree. There's something—you save out," you groped. "Maybe I envy that. It's like a reserve tank or something.You walk out of here, and this other source kicks in.You putter around Europe, or Malaysia, until it finally runs low and you come home."

Yet in truth what you had described was closer to my pre-Franklin self. I was once an efficient litde unit, like one of those travel toothbrushes that folds into a box. I k n o w I tend to over-romanticize those times, though in the early days especially I had a fire under me. I was a kid, really. I'd initially gotten the idea for A W i n g and a Prayer halfway through my own first trip to Europe, for which I'd brought way too little cash.This notion of a bohemian travel guide gave me a sense of purpose in what was otherwise disintegrating into one long cup of coffee, and from then on I went everywhere with a tattered notebook, recording rates for single rooms, whether they had hot water or the staff spoke any English or the toilets backed up.

It's easy to forget, n o w that AWAP has attracted so m u c h competition, but in the mid-sixties globe-trotters were pretty m u c h at the mercy of *The Blue Guide*, whose target audience was middle-aged and middle class. In 1966, w h e n the first

edition of *Western Europe on a Wing and a Prayer* w e n t into a second printing almost overnight, I realized that I was onto something. I like to portray myself as shrewd, but we b o t h k n o w I was lucky. I couldn't have anticipated the backpacking craze, and I wasn't e n o u g h of an amateur d e m o g r a p h e r to have taken deliberate advantage of all those restless baby b o o m e r s c o m i n g of age at once, all on Daddy's dime in an era of prosperity, but all optimistic about h o w far a few h u n d r e d dollars w o u l d take t h e m in Italy and desperate for advice on h o w to make a trip D a d never wanted t h e m to take in the first place last as long as possible. I mostly reasoned that the next explorer after me w o u l d be scared, the way I was scared, and nervous of being taken, the way I was sometimes taken,

and if I was willing to get the food poisoning first I could make sure that at least our novice wayfarer didn't stay up heaving on that first electric night overseas. I don't mean that I was benevolent, only that I w r o t e the guide that I wished I'd b e e n able to use myself.

You're rolling your eyes.This lore is shopworn, and maybe it's inevitable that the very things that first attract you to someone are the same things with which you later grow irritated. Bear with me.

You k n o w that I was always horrified by the prospect of turning out like my mother. Funny, Giles and I only learned the t e r m "agoraphobic" in our thirties, and I've always been perplexed by its strict definition, which I've looked up m o r e than once: "fear of open or public spaces." N o t , from what I could tell, an apt description of her complaint. My mother wasn't afraid of football stadiums, she was afraid to leave the house, and I got the impression she was just as panicked by enclosed spaces as by open ones, so long as the enclosed space did not happen to be 137 Enderby Avenue in Racine, Wisconsin. But there doesn't seem to be a word for that (Enderbyphilia?), and at least w h e n I refer to my m o t h e r as agoraphobic, people seem to understand that she orders in.

Jesus that's ironic, I've heard more times than I can count. *With*

all the places you've been? O t h e r people savor the symmetry of apparent opposites.

But let me be candid. I *am* m u c h like my mother. Maybe it's because as a child I was always running errands for which I was too young and that therefore daunted me; I was sent out to locate n e w gaskets for the kitchen sink w h e n I was eight years old. In pushing me to be her emissary while I was still so small, my mother managed to reproduce in me the same disproportionate anguish about m i n o r interactions with the outside world that she herself felt at thirty-two.

I can't recall a single trip abroad that, up against it, I have truly wanted to take, that I haven't in some way dreaded and wanted desperately to get out of. I was repeatedly forced out the door by a conspiracy of previous commitments: the ticket purchased, the taxi ordered, a host of reservations confirmed, and just to box myself in a litde further I would always have talked up the j o u r n e y to friends, before florid farewells. Even on the plane, I'd have been blissfully content for the wide-body to penetrate the stratosphere for all eternity. Landing was agony, finding my first night's bed was agony, though the respite itself—my ad hoc replication of Enderby Avenue—was glorious. At length, I got hooked on this sequence of accelerating terrors culminating in a vertiginous plunge to my adoptive mattress. My whole life I have been making myself do things. I never went to Madrid, Franklin, out of appetite for paella, and every one of those research trips you imagined I used to slip the surly bonds of our domestic tranquillity was really a gauntlet I'd thrown down and compelled myself to pick up. If I was ever glad to have gone, I was never glad to go.

But over the years the aversion grew milder, and surmounting a mere annoyance is not so rich. O n c e I habituated to rising to my o w n challenge—to proving repeatedly that I was independent, competent, mobile, and grown-up—gradually the fear inverted: T h e one thing I dreaded more than another trip to Malaysia was staying home.

So I wasn't only afraid of becoming my mother, but *a* mother.

I was afraid of being the steadfast, stationary anchor w h o provides a j u m p i n g - o f f place for another young adventurer whose travels I might envy and whose future is still u n m o o r e d and unmapped.

I was afraid of being that archetypal figure in the doorway—frowzy, a little p l u m p — w h o waves good-bye and blows kisses as a backpack is stashed in the trunk; w h o dabs her eyes with an apron ruffle in the fumes of departing exhaust; w h o turns forlornly to twist the latch and wash the too-few dishes by the sink as the silence in the room presses d o w n like a dropped ceiling. M o r e than of leaving, I had developed a horror of being

left. H o w often I had done that to you, stranded you with the baguette crusts of our farewell dinner and swept off to my waiting taxi.

I don't believe I ever told you h o w sorry I was for putting you through all those little deaths of serial desertion, or c o m m e n d e d you on constraining expression of your quite justifiable sense of abandonment to the occasional quip.

Franklin, I was *absolutely terrified of having a child.* Before I got pregnant, my visions of child rearing—reading stories about cabooses with smiley faces at bedtime, feeding glop into slack mouths—all seemed like pictures of someone else. I dreaded confrontation with what could prove a closed, stony nature, my o w n selfishness and lack of generosity, the thick, tarry powers of my o w n resentment. However intrigued by a " t u r n of the page," I was mortified by the prospect of becoming hopelessly trapped in someone else's story. A n d I believe that this terror is precisely what must have snagged me, the way a ledge will tempt one to j u m p off. T h e very insurmountability of the task, its very unattractiveness, was in the end what attracted me to it.

D E C E M B E R 3 9 , 2 0 0 0

Dear Franklin,

I've settled myself d o w n in a little coffee shop in Chatham, which is w h y this is handwritten; then, you were always able to decipher my spidery scrawl on postcards, since I gave you a terrible lot of practice.The couple at the next table is having a k n o c k d o w n drag-out over the application process for absentee ballots in Seminole C o u n t y — t h e kind of minutiae that seems to consume the whole country right now, since everyone around me has turned into a procedural pedant. All the same, I bask in their heatedness as before a woodstove. My o w n apathy is b o n e chilling.

T h e Bagel Cafe is a h o m e y establishment, and I don't think the waitress will mind if I nurse a cup of coffee by my legal pad. Chatham, too, is homey, authentic—with the kind of Middle America quaintness that more well-to-do towns like Stockbridge and Lenox spend a great deal of m o n e y to feign. Its railroad station still receives trains. T h e commercial main drag sports the traditional lineup of secondhand bookstores (full of those Loren Estleman novels you devoured), bakeries with burnt-edged bran muffins, charity consignment shops, a cinema whose marquee says "theatre" on the parochial presumption that British spelling is m o r e sophisticated, and a liquor store that, along with Taylor magnums for the locals, stocks some surprisingly pricey California zinfandels for out-of-towners. Manhattan residents with second homes keep this disheveled hamlet alive n o w that most local

industries have closed—these summer folk and, of course, the n e w correctional facility on the outskirts of town.

I was thinking about you on the drive up, if that doesn't go without saying. By way of counterpoint, I was trying to picture the kind of man I assumed I'd end up with before we met. T h e vision was doubtless a composite of the on-the-road boyfriends you always rode me about. Some of my romantic blow-ins were sweet, though whenever a w o m a n describes a m a n as *sweet*, the dalliance is doomed.

If that assortment of cameo companions in Aries orTelAviv was anything to go by (sorry—"the losers"), I was destined to settle d o w n with a stringy cerebral type whose skittering metabolism burns chickpea concoctions at a ferocious rate. Sharp elbows, prominent Adam's apple, narrow wrists. A strict vegetarian.

An anguished sort w h o reads Nietzsche and wears spectacles, alienated from his time and contemptuous of the automobile.

An avid cyclist and hill walker. Professional marginalia—perhaps a potter, with a love of hardwoods and herb gardens, whose aspirations to an unpretentious life of physical toil and lingering sunsets on a porch are somewhat belied by the steely, repressed rage with which he pitches disappointing vases into an oil drum.

A weakness for weed; brooding. An understated but ruthless sense of humor; a dry, distant laugh. Back massages. Recycling. Sitar music and a flirtation with Buddhism that is mercifully behind him.Vitamins and cribbage, water filters and French films. A paci-fist with three guitars but no TV, and unpleasant associations with team sports from a picked-on childhood. A hint of vulnerability in the receding hairline at the temples; a soft, dark ponytail whisping d o w n the spine. A sallow, olive complexion, almost sickly. Tender, whispering sex. Curious carved w o o d e n talisman thonged around the neck that he will neither explain nor take off, even in the bath. Diaries that I mustn't read, pasted up with sick squib clippings that illustrate what a terrible world we live in. ("Grisly Find: Police found assorted bits of a man's body, including a pair of hands and two legs, in six luggage lockers in Tokyo's central railway station. After inspecting all 2,500 coin lockers, police found a pair of buttocks in a black plastic garbage bag.") A cynic about mainstream politics with an unabating ironic detachment from popular culture. A n d most of all? W i t h fluent if prettily accented English, a *foreigner.*

We would live in the countryside—in Portugal, or a little village in Central America—where a farm up the road sells raw milk, fresh-churned sweet butter, and fat, seedy pumpkins. O u r stone cottage would writhe with creepers, its w i n d o w boxes blushing red geraniums, and we would bake chewy ryes and carrot brownies for our rustic neighbors. An overeducated man, my fantasy partner would still root about the soil of our idyll for the seeds of his .own discontent. A n d surrounded by natural bounty, grow spitefully ascetic.

Are you chuckling yet? Because then along came you. A big, broad meat eater with brash blond hair and ruddy skin that burns at the beach. A bundle of appetites. A full, boisterous guffaw; a m a n w h o tells knock-knock

jokes. H o t dogs—not even East 86th Street bratwurst, but mealy, greasy pig guts of that terrifying pink.

Baseball. G i m m e caps. Puns and blockbuster movies, raw tap water and six-packs. A fearless, trusting consumer w h o only reads labels to make sure there are plenty of additives. A fan of the open road with a passion for his pickup w h o thinks bicycles are for nerds.

Fucks hard and talks dirty; a private though unapologetic taste for porn. Mysteries, thrillers, and science fiction; a subscription to *National Geographic.* Barbecues on the Fourth of July and intentions, in the fullness of time, to take up *golf.* Delights in crappy snack foods of every description: Burgles. Curlies. Cheesies.

Squigglies—you're laughing, but I don't eat them—anything that looks less like food than packing material and at least six degrees of separation from the farm. Bruce Springsteen, the early albums, cranked up high with the truck w i n d o w d o w n and your hair flying. Sings along, off-key—how is it possible that I should be endeared by such a tin ear? Beach Boys. Elvis—never lost your roots, did you, loved plain old rock and roll. Bombast. T h o u g h not impossibly stodgy; I remember, you took a shine to Pearl Jam, which was exactly w h e n Kevin went off t h e m . . .(sorry). It just had to be noisy; you hadn't any time for my Elgar, my Leo Kottke, though you made an exception for Aaron Copeland.You wiped your eyes brusquely at Tanglewood, as if to clear gnats, hoping I didn't notice that " Q u i e t City" made you cry. A n d ordinary, obvious pleasures: the Bronx Z o o and the Botanical Gardens, the C o n e y Island roller coaster, the Staten Island ferry, the Empire State Building.You were the only N e w Yorker I'd ever met who'd actually taken the ferry to the Statue of Liberty Y o u dragged me along once, and we were the only tourists on the boat w h o spoke English. Representational art—Edward Hopper. A n d my lord, Franklin, a *Republican.* A belief in a strong defense but otherwise small government and low taxes. Physically, too, you were such a surprise—yourself a strong defense. T h e r e were times you worried that I thought you too heavy, I made so m u c h of your size, though you weighed in at a pretty standard 165,170, always battling those five pounds' worth of cheddar widgets that would settle over your belt. But to me you were *enormous.* So sturdy and

solid, so wide, so thick, none of that delicate wristy business of my imaginings. Built like an oak tree, against which I could pitch my pillow and read; mornings, I could curl into the crook of your branches. H o w lucky we are, w h e n we're spared what we think we want! H o w weary I might have grown of all those silly pots and fussy diets, and h o w I detest the w h i n e of sitar music!

But the biggest surprise of all was that I married an *American.*

N o t just any American either, a man w h o happened to be American. N o , you were American by choice as well as by birth.

You were, in fact, a patriot. I had never met one before. Rubes, yes. Blind, untraveled, ignorant people w h o thought the United States was the whole world, so to say anything against it was like decrying the universe, or air. Instead, you had been a few places—Mexico, one disastrous trip to Italy with a w o m a n whose cornucopia of allergies included tomatoes—and had decided that you liked your o w n country. N o , that you *loved* your o w n

country, its smoothness and efficiency, its practicality, its broad, unpretentious accents and emphasis on honesty. I would say—I did say—that you were enamored of an archaic version of the U.S., either an America that was long past or that never was; that you were enamored of an idea. And you would say—did say—that part of what America was was an idea, and that was more than most countries could claim, which were mosdy scrappy pasts and circumscriptions on a map. It was a fine, it was a beautiful idea, too, you said, and you pointed o u t — I granted you this—that a nation that aimed to preserve above all the ability of its citizens to do pretty m u c h whatever they wanted was exactly the sort of place that should have captivated the likes of me. But it hasn't worked out that way, I'd object, and you'd counter, better than anywhere else, and we would be off.

It is true that I grew disenchanted. But I would still like to thank you for introducing me to my o w n country. Wasn't that h o w we met? We'd decided at AWAP to r u n those advertisements in *Mother Jones* and *Rolling Stone,* and w h e n I was vague about the photos we wanted, Young & R u b i c a m had you stop in.

You showed up at my office in a flannel shirt and dusty jeans, a beguiling impertinence. I tried so hard to be professional, because your shoulders were distracting. France, I supposed. T h e R h o n e Valley. A n d then I dithered over the expense—sending you over, putting you up. You laughed. Don't be ridiculous, you dismissed.

I can find you the R h o n e Valley in Pennsylvania. W h i c h indeed you did.

Hitherto, I had always regarded the United States as a place to leave. After you brazenly asked me o u t — a n executive with w h o m you had a business relationship—you goaded me to admit that had I been b o r n elsewhere, the U.S. of A. was perhaps the first country I would make a beeline to visit: whatever else I might think of it, the place that called the shots and pulled the strings, that made the movies and sold the Coca-Cola and shipped *Star Trek* all the way to Java; the center of the action, a country that you needed a relationship with even if that relationship was hostile;

a country that demanded if not acceptance at least rejection—anything but neglect. T h e country in every other country's face, that would visit *you* whether you liked it or not almost anywhere on the planet. Okay, okay, I protested. *Okay.* I would visit.

So I visited. In those early days, remember your recurrent astonishment? That I had never been to a baseball game. Or to Yellowstone. Or the Grand Canyon. I sneered at them, but I had never eaten a McDonald's hot apple pie. (I confess: I liked it.) Someday, you observed, there would be no McDonald's. Just because there are lots of them doesn't mean that the hot

apple pies aren't excellent or that it isn't a privilege to live in a time w h e n you can buy t h e m for 99 cents. That was one of your favorite themes: that profusion, replication, popularity wasn't necessarily devaluing, and that time itself made all things rare. You loved to savor the present tense and were more conscious than anyone I have ever m e t that its every constituent is fleeting.

And that was your perspective on your country as well: that it was not forever. That of course it was an empire, though that was nothing to be ashamed of. History is made of empires, and the United States was by far and away the greatest, richest, and fairest empire that had ever dominated the earth. Inevitably, it would fall. Empires always did. But we were lucky, you said.

We got to participate in the most fascinating social experiment ever attempted. Sure it was imperfect, you would add, with the same hastiness with which I observed before Kevin was b o r n that of course some children "had problems." But you said that if the U.S. were to fall or founder during your lifetime, collapse economically, be overrun by an aggressor, or corrupt from within into something vicious, you would weep.

I believe you would. But I sometimes considered during those days you were carting me off to the Smithsonian, needling me to recite the presidents in order, grilling me on the causes of the Haymarket Riots, that I wasn't visiting the country, quite. I was visiting *your* country. T h e one you had made for yourself, the way a child constructs a log cabin out of Popsicle sticks. It was

a lovely reproduction, too. Even now, w h e n I glimpse snippets of the Preamble to the Constitution, *We, the people...,* the hair raises on the back of my neck. Because I hear your voice.The D e -

claration of Independence, *We hold these truths*—your voice.

Irony. I have thought about you and irony. It always got your back up w h e n my friends from Europe would come through and dismiss our countrymen as "having no sense of irony." Yet (ironically) in the latter twentieth century, irony was huge in the U.S., painfully so. In fact, I was sick of it, though I didn't realize that until we met. C o m i n g into the eighties, everything was

"retro," and there was an undercurrent of snideness, a distancing in all those fifties diners with chrome stools and oversized root-beer floats. Irony means at once having and not having. Irony involves a prissy dabbling, a disavowal. We had friends whose apartments were completely tricked out in sardonic kitsch—pickaninny dolls, framed advertisements for Kellogg's cornflakes from the twenties ("Look at the bowlfuls go!")—who owned nothing that wasn't a joke.

You wouldn't live that way. O h , to have " n o sense of irony"

was supposedly to not k n o w what it was—to be a moron—-to have no sense of humor. A n d you k n e w what it was. You laughed, a little, at the lamp-bearing cast-iron black jockey that Belmont picked up for their hearth, to be polite. You got the joke. You just didn't think it was that funny, really, and in your o w n life you wanted objects that were truly beautiful and n o t just a laugh. Such a bright man, you were sincere by design and not merely by nature, *American* by personal fiat, and you would embrace all that was good in that. Is it called naivete w h e n you're naive on purpose? You would go on picnics. You would take conventional vacations to national monuments. You would sing *O'er the la-and of the free!* at the top of your tuneless voice at Mets games, and never with a smirk. T h e United States, you claimed, was on the existential cutting edge. It was a country whose prosperity was without precedence, where virtually everyone had enough to eat; a country that strove for justice and offered up

nearly every entertainment and sport, every religion, ethnicity, occupation, and political affiliation to be had, with a wild wealth of landscapes, of flora and fauna and weather. If it was n o t possible to have a fine, rich,

sumptuous life in this country, with a beautiful wife and a healthy, growing boy, then it was n o t possible anywhere. And even now, I believe that you may be right. But that it may not be possible anywhere.

9 P.M. (back home)

T h e waitress was tolerant, but the Bagel Cafe was closing.

And printout may be impersonal, but it's easier on the eye. For that matter, I worry that throughout that handwritten passage you've been skimming, reading ahead. I worry that the instant you spotted " C h a t h a m " up top you could think of nothing else, and that you for once couldn't care less about my feelings for the United States. *Chatham.* I go to *Chatham?*

I do. I go at every opportunity. Fortunately, these journeys every two weeks up to Claverack Juvenile Correctional Facility are aimed at such a restrictive w i n d o w of visiting hours that I am not free to consider going an h o u r later or another day. I leave at exactly 11:30 because it is the first Saturday of the m o n t h and I must arrive immediately after the second lunch slot at 2:00.1 do not indulge myself in reflection over h o w m u c h I dread going to see him, or, more improbably, look forward to it. I just go.

You're astonished. You shouldn't be. He's my son, too, and a mother should visit her child in prison. I have no end of failings as a mother, but I have always followed the rules. If anything, following the letter of the unwritten parental law was one of my failings.That came out in the trial— the civil suit. I was appalled by h o w upstanding I looked on paper. Vince Mancini, Mary's lawyer, accused me in court of visiting my son so dutifully in detention during his o w n trial only because I anticipated being sued for parental negligence. I was acting a part, he claimed, going through the motions. Of course, the trouble with jurisprudence is that it cannot accommodate subtleties. Mancini was onto something. There may indeed be an element of theater in these visits. B u t they continue w h e n no o n e is watching, because if I am trying to prove that I am a good mother, I am proving this, dismally, as it happens, to myself.

Kevin himself has been surprised by my dogged appearances, which is not to say, in the beginning at least, pleased. Back in 1999, at sixteen, he was

still at that age w h e n to be seen with your m o t h e r was embarrassing; h o w bittersweetly these truisms about teenagers persist through the most adult of troubles. A n d in those first few visits he seemed to regard my very presence as an accusation, so before I said a single word he'd get angry. It didn't seem sensible that *he* should be the one mad at *me*.

B u t in the same vein, w h e n a car nearly sideswipes me in a crosswalk, I've noticed that the driver is frequently furious—shouting, gesticulating, cursing—at me, w h o m he nearly ran over and w h o had the undisputed right of way. This is a dynamic particular to encounters with male drivers, w h o seem to grow all the m o r e indignant the more completely they are in the wrong.

I think the emotional reasoning, if you can call it that, is transitive: You make me feel bad; feeling bad makes me mad; ergo, you make me mad. If I'd had the presence back then to seize on the first part of that proof, I might have glimpsed in Kevin's instantaneous dudgeon a glimmer of hope. But at the time, his fury simply mystified me. It seemed so unfair. W o m e n tend more toward chagrin, and not only in traffic. So I blamed me, and he blamed me. I felt ganged up on.

Hence, w h e n he was first incarcerated we didn't have conversations as such. Simply being in front of him made me limp. He sapped me even of the energy to cry, which anyway would not have been very productive. After five minutes, I might ask him, my voice hoarse, about the food. He would gawk at me incredulously, as if under the circumstances the inquiry were as inane as it actually was. Or I'd ask, "Are they treating you all right?" although I wasn't sure what that meant or even whether I *wanted* his minders to treat him "all right." He'd slur that *sure*

they kiss me beddy-bye every night. It didn't take long for me to run out of pro forma M o m m y questions, for w h i c h I think we were both relieved.

If it took little time to get past my posing as the loyal m o t h e r who's only concerned that sonny is eating his vegetables, we are still contending with Kevin's more impenetrable pose as the sociopath w h o is beyond reach. T h e trouble is, while my role as a m o t h e r w h o stands by her son no matter what is ultimately demeaning—it is mindless, irrational, blind, and sappy, hence a part I might gratefully shed—Kevin gets too m u c h sustenance from his o w n cliche to let it go quiedy. He still seems intent on demonstrating to me that he may have been a subjugant in my house w h o had to clean his plate, but n o w he's a celebrity who's been on the cover of *Newsweek,* whose fricative appellation, *Kevin Khatchadourian*—or " K K " to the tabloids, like Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia—has tsked chidingly off every major network news anchor's tongue. He's even had a hand in setting the national agenda, sparking n e w calls for corporal punishment, juvenile death sentences, and the V-chip. In lockup, he would have me k n o w that he is no tinhorn delinquent, but a notorious fiend of w h o m his less accomplished fellow juveniles are in awe.

O n c e in those early days (after he'd grown more talkative), I asked him: " H o w do they regard you, the other boys? Do they...

are they critical? Of what you did?" This was as close as I could come to asking, do they trip you in hallways or hawk in your soup. At first, you see, I was hesitant, deferential. He frightened me, physically frightened me, and I was desperate not to set him off. There were prison guards nearby, of course, but there had been security personnel in his high school, police in Gladstone, and what good had they been? I never feel protected anymore.

Kevin honked, that hard, joyless laugh forced through his nose. A n d said something like, "Are you kidding? They fucking worship me, *Mumsey.* There's not a juve in this joint w h o hasn't taken out fifty dickheads in his *peer group* before breakfast—in his head. I ' m the only one with the stones to do it in real life."

Whenever Kevin cites "real life," it is with the excessive firmness with which fundamentalists reference heaven or hell. It's as if he's trying to talk himself into something.

I had only his word, of course, that far from being shunned Kevin had achieved a status of mythic proportions among hoods w h o had merely hijacked cars or knifed rival drug dealers. But I have come to believe he must have once garnered some prestige, since, in his oblique fashion, just this afternoon he allowed that it had begun to ebb.

He said, "Tell you what, I'm fucking tired of telling that same fucking story"—from which I could infer that, rather, his fellow inmates were tired of hearing it. Over a year and a half is a long time for teenagers, and Kevin is already yesterday's news. He's getting old enough to appreciate, too, that one of the differences between a "perp," as they say in cop shows, and your average newspaper reader is that onlookers are allowed the luxury of getting "fucking tired of the same fucking story" and are free to move on. Culprits are stuck in what must be a tyrannical rehearsal of the same old tale. Kevin will be climbing the stairs to the aerobic-conditioning alcove of the Gladstone High gym for the rest of his life.

So he is resentful, and I don't blame him for being bored with his own atrocity already, or for envying others their capacity to abandon it. Today, he went on to grouse about some "pipsqueak"

new arrival at Claverack w h o was only thirteen. Kevin added for my benefit, "His cock's the size of aTootsie Roll. T h e little ones, you know?" Kevin wiggled his pinkie."Three for a quarter."With relish, Kevin explained the boy's claim to fame: An elderly couple in an adjacent apartment had complained about how loudly he played his CDs of the Monkees at three in the morning.The next weekend, the couple's daughter discovered her parents in their bed, slit from crotch to throat.

"That's appalling," I said. "I can't believe anyone still listens to the Monkees."

I earned a begrudging snort. He went on to explain that the police have never found the entrails, which is the detail on w h i c h the media, not to

mention the boy's overnight Claverack fan club, has seized.

"Your friend's precocious," I said. " T h e missing entrails—didn't you teach me that to get noticed in this business you have to add a twist?"

You may be horrified, Franklin, but it has taken me the better part of two years to get this far with him, and our black, straight-faced banter passes for progress. B u t Kevin is still not comfortable with my gameliness. I usurp his lines. And I had made him jealous.

"I don't think he's so smart," said Kevin aloofly."Probably just looked d o w n at those guts and thought, *Cool! Free sausages!"*

Kevin shot me a furtive glance. My impassivity was clearly a disappointment.

"Everyone around here thinks that twerp's so tough," Kevin resumed. "All like, 'Man, you can play, like, "Sound of Music"

loud's you want, I ain't sayin' *nuttin*.'" His *African-American* accent has become quite accomplished and has made inroads into his own. "But I'm not impressed. He's just a kid. Too litde to k n o w what he was doing."

" A n d you weren't?" I asked sharply.

Kevin folded his arms and looked satisfied; I had gone back to playing Mother. "I k n e w exactly what I was doing." He leaned onto his elbows. *"And I'd do it again."*

"I can see why," I said primly, gesturing to the windowless r o o m whose walls were paneled in vermilion and chartreuse; I have no idea why they decorate prisons like R o m p e r R o o m . "It's worked out so well for you."

"Just swapped one shithole for another." He waved his right hand with two extended fingers in a manner that betrayed he's taken up smoking. "Worked out swell."

Subject closed, as usual. Still I made a note of the fact that this thirteen-year-old parvenu's stealing the Claverack limelight aggrieved our son. It

seems that you and I needn't have worried about his dearth of ambition.

As for my parting with him today, I had thought to leave it out. B u t it is just what I would like to withhold from you that I may need most to include.

T h e guard with a mud-spatter of facial moles had called time; for once we had used up the full h o u r without spending most of it staring at the clock. We were standing on either side of the table, and I was about to mumble some filler line like "I'll see you in two weeks," w h e n I realized Kevin had been staring straight at me, whereas his every other glance had been sidelong. That stopped me, unnerved me, and made me w o n d e r why I had ever wanted him to look me in the eye.

O n c e I was no longer fussing with my coat, he said, "You may be fooling the neighbors and the guards and Jesus and your gaga m o t h e r with these goody-goody visits of yours, but you're not fooling me. Keep it up if you want a gold star. But don't be dragging your ass back here on my account." T h e n he added,

"Because I hate you."

I k n o w that children say that all the time, in fits: *I hate you, I hate you!* eyes squeezed with tears. B u t Kevin is approaching eighteen, and his delivery was flat.

I had some idea of what I was supposed to say back: *Now, I know you don't mean that,* w h e n I k n e w that he did. Or, *I love you anyway, young man, like it or not.* But I had an inkling that it was following just these pat scripts that had helped to land me in a garish overheated r o o m that smelled like a bus toilet on an otherwise lovely, unusually clement D e c e m b e r afternoon. So I said instead, in the same informational tone, "I often hate you, too, Kevin," and turned heel.

So you can see why I needed a p i c k - m e - u p coffee. It was an effort to resist the bar.

Driving home, I was reflecting that however m u c h I might 51

wish to eschew a country whose citizens, when encouraged to do "pretty much what they want," eviscerate the elderly, it made perfect sense that I would marry another American. I had better reason than most to find foreigners passe, having penetrated their exoticism to the chopped liver they are to one another. Besides, by the time I was thirty-three I was tired, suffering the cumulative exhaustion of standing all day that you only register when you sit down. I was forever myself a foreigner, feverishly rehearsing phrase-book Italian for "basket of bread." Even in England, I had to remember to say "pavement" instead of "sidewalk." Conscious that I was an ambassador of sorts, I would defy a daily barrage of hostile preconceptions, taking care not to be arrogant, pushy, ignorant, presumptuous, crass, or loud in public.

But if I had arrogated to myself the whole planet as my personal backyard, this very effrontery marked me as hopelessly American, as did the fanciful notion that I could remake myself into a tropical internationalist hybrid from the horribly specific origins of Racine, Wisconsin. Even the carelessness with which I abandoned my native land was classically of a piece with our nosy, resdess, aggressive people, w h o all (save you) complacently assume that America is a permanent fixture. Europeans are better clued.

They know about the liveness, the contemporariness of history, its immediate rapacities, and will often rush back to tend their own perishable gardens to make sure that Denmark, say, is still there.

But to those of us for w h o m "invasion" is exclusively associated with outer space, our country is an unassailable bedrock that will wait indefinitely intact for our return. Indeed, I had explained my peripatetics more than once to foreigners as facilitated by my perception that "the United States doesn't need me."

It's embarrassing to pick your life partner according to what television shows he watched as a child, but in a way that's exactly what I did. I wanted to describe some wiry, ineffectual little man as a "Barney Fife" without

having to tortuously append that Barney was a character in a warm, rarely exported serial called

The Andy Griffith Show, in w h i c h an incompetent deputy was always getting into trouble by dint of his o w n hubris. I wanted to be able to h u m the theme song to *The Honeymooners* and have you chime in w i t h , " H o w sweet it isF'And I wanted to be able to say "That came out of left field" and not kick myself that baseball images didn't necessarily scan abroad. I wanted to stop having to pretend I was a cultural freak with no customs of my own, to have a house that itself had rules about shoes to which its visitors must conform. You restored to me the concept of home.

Home is precisely what Kevin has taken from me. My neighbors n o w regard me with the same suspicion they reserve for illegal immigrants.They grope for words and speak to me with exaggerated deliberation, as if to a w o m a n for w h o m English is a second language. A n d since I have been exiled to this rarefied class, the mother of one of those " C o l u m b i n e boys," I, too, grope for words, not sure h o w to translate my off-world thoughts into the language of two-for-the-price-of-one sales and parking tickets. Kevin has turned me into a foreigner again, in my o w n country. A n d maybe this helps to explain these biweekly Saturday visits, because it is only at Claverack Correctional that I need not translate my alien argot into the language of the suburban mundane. It is only at Claverack Correctional that we can make allusions without explanations, that we can take as understood a shared cultural past.

A

_ 5 3 _

D E C E M B E R 8 , 2 0 0 0

Dear Franklin,

I ' m the one at Travel R Us w h o volunteers to stay late and finish up, but most of the Christmas flights are booked, and this afternoon we were all encouraged as a "treat" to knock off early, it being Friday. Beginning another desolate marathon in this duplex at barely 5 P.M. makes me close to hysterical.

Propped before the tube, poking at chicken, filling in the easy answers in the *Times* crossword, I often have a nagging sensation of waiting for something. I don't mean that classic business of waiting for your life to begin, like some c h u m p on the starting line w h o hasn't heard the gun. N o , it's waiting for something in particular, for a knock on the door, and the sensation can grow quite insistent. Tonight it's returned in force. Half an ear cocked, something in me, all night, every night, is waiting for you to come home.

W h i c h inevitably puts me in mind of that seminal May evening in 1982, w h e n my expectation that you would walk into the kitchen anytime n o w was less unreasonable. You were location scouting in the pine barrens of southern N e w Jersey for a Ford advertisement and were due h o m e about 7:00 P.M.I'd recendy returned from a monthlong trip to update *Greece on a Wing and a Prayer,* and w h e n you hadn't shown up by 8:00, I reminded myself that my own

plane had been six hours late, which had ruined your plans to sweep me from JFK to the U n i o n Square Cafe.

Still, by 9:00 I was getting edgy, not to mention hungry. I chewed distractedly on a chunk of pistachio halvah from Athens.

On an ethnic roll, I'd made a pan of moussaka, with which I planned to convince you that, nestled against ground lamb with loads of cinnamon, you did like eggplant after all.

By 9:30, the custard topping had started to brown and crust around the edges, even though I'd turned the oven d o w n to 250°.

I took out the pan. Balanced on the fulcrum between anger and anguish, I indulged a fit of pique, banging the drawer w h e n I w e n t for the aluminum foil, grumbling about having fried up all those circles of eggplant, and n o w it was turning into a *big, dry, charred mess* I yanked my Greek salad out of the fridge and furiously pitted the calamatas, but then left it to wilt on the counter and the balance tipped. I couldn't be mad anymore. I was petrified.

I checked that both phones were on the hook. I confirmed that the elevator was working, though you could always take the stairs.

Ten minutes later, I checked the phones again.

This is why people smoke, I thought.

W h e n the p h o n e did ring at around 10:20, I pounced. At my mother's voice, my heart sank. I told her tersely that you were over three hours late, and I mustn't tie up the line. She was sympathetic, a rare sentiment from my mother, w h o then tended to regard my life as one long accusation, as if the sole reason I ventured to yet another country was to r u b her nose in the fact that for one more day she had not left her porch. I should have remembered that she, too, had been through this very experience at twenty-three, and not for hours but for weeks, until a slim envelope flipped through her front door slot from the War Department. Instead I was cruelly rude, and h u n g up.

Ten-forty. Southern N e w Jersey wasn't perilous—timber and farmland, not like Newark. But there were cars like primed missiles, and drivers whose stupidity was murderous. *Why didn't you call?*

That was before the advent of mobile phones, so I'm not blaming you. And I realize this experience is common as dirt: Your husband, your wife, your child is late, terribly late, and then they come home after all and there's an explanation. For the most part, these brushes against a parallel universe in which they never do come home—for which there is an explanation, but one that will divide your whole life into before and after— vanish without a trace. The hours that had elongated into lifetimes suddenly collapse like a fan. So even though the salty terror in my gums tasted familiar, I couldn't recall a specific instance w h e n I had paced our loft before, head swimming with cataclysms: an aneurysm, an aggrieved postal worker with an automatic in Burger King.

By 11:00,1 was making vows.

I gulped a glass of sauvignon blanc; it tasted like pickle juice.

This was wine without you. T h e moussaka, its dry, dead hulk: This was food without you. O u r loft, rich with the international booty of baskets and carvings, took on the tacky, cluttered aspect of an import oudet: This was our home without you. Objects had never seemed so inert, so pugnaciously incompensatory.Your remnants mocked me: the j u m p rope limp on its hook; the dirty socks, stiff, caricatured deflations of your size eleven feet.

O h , Franklin, of course I knew that a child can't substitute for a husband, because I had seen my brother stooped from the pressure to be the "little man of the house"; I had seen the way it tortured him that Mother was always searching his face for resemblances to that ageless photo on the mantle. It wasn't fair.

Giles couldn't even remember our father, w h o died w h e n he was three and w h o had long since transformed from a flesh-and-blood Dad w h o dribbled soup on his tie into a tall, dark icon looming over the fireplace in his spotless army air corps uniform, an immaculate emblem of all that the boy was not. To this day Giles carries himself with a diffidence. W h e n in the spring of 1999 he forced himself to visit me and there was nothing to say or do, he flushed with speechless resentment, because I was reviving in h i m the same sense of inadequacy that had permeated his childhood. Even more has he resented the public attention re-fracted off our son. Kevin and *Thursday* have routed him from his rabbit hole, and he's furious with me for the exposure. His sole ambition is obscurity, because Giles associates any scrutiny with being found wanting.

Still I kicked myself that you and I had made love the night before and one more evening I had absently slipped that rubber hat around my cervix. W h a t could I do with your j u m p rope, your dirty socks? Wasn't there only one respectable m e m e n t o of a man worth keeping, the kind that draws Valentines and learns to spell *Mississippi*? No offspring could replace you. But if I ever had to miss you, miss you forever, I wanted to have someone to miss you alongside, w h o would k n o w you if only as a chasm in his life, as you were a chasm in mine.

W h e n the phone rang again at nearly midnight, I h u n g back. It was late enough to be a reluctant emissary of a hospital, the police.

I let it ring a second time, my hand on the receiver, warming the plastic like a magic lantern that might grant one last wish. My mother claims that in 1945 she left the envelope on the table for hours, brewing herself cup after cup of black, acid tea and letting them grow cold. Already pregnant with me from his last h o m e leave, she took frequent trips to the toilet, closing the bathroom door and keeping the light off, as if hiding out. Haltingly, she had described to me an almost gladiatorial afternoon: facing d o w n an adversary bigger and more ferocious than she, and knowing that she would lose.

You sounded exhausted, your voice so insubstantial that for one ugly m o m e n t I mistook it for my mother's. You apologized for the worry. T h e

pickup had broken d o w n in the middle of nowhere.You'd walked twelve miles to find a phone.

There was no point in talking at length, but it was agony to end the call. W h e n we said good-bye, my eyes welled in shame that I had ever declared, "I love you!" in that peck-at-the-door spirit that makes such a travesty of passion.

— 58 —

I was spared. In the hour it took a taxi to drive you to Manhattan, I was allowed the luxury of shpping back to my old world of worrying about casseroles, of seducing you into eggplant and nagging you to do the laundry. It was the same world in which I could put off the possibility of our having a child another night, because we had reservations, and there were many more nights.

But I refused to relax right away, to collapse into the casual heedlessness that makes everyday life possible, and without which we would all batten ourselves into our living rooms for eternity like my mother. In fact, for a few hours I had probably been treated to a taste of my mother's whole postwar life, since what she lacks may not be courage so much as a necessary self-deceit.

Her people slaughtered by Turks, her husband plucked from the sky by devious httle yellow people, my mother sees chaos biting at her doorstep, while the rest of us inhabit a fabricated playscape whose benevolence is a collective delusion. In 1999, w h e n I entered my mother's universe for good—a place where anything could happen and often did—toward what Giles and I had always regarded as her neurosis I grew much kinder.

You would indeed come home—this once. But w h e n I put the phone down, it registered with a whispered click:There could yet come a day when you did not.

Thus instead of going slack and infinite, time still felt frantically short. W h e n you walked in you were so tired you could hardly speak. I let you skip dinner, but I would not let you sleep. I have experienced my share of burning sexual desire, and I can assure you that this was an urgency of another order. I wanted to arrange a backup, for you and for us, like slipping a carbon in my IBM

Selectric. I wanted to make sure that if anything happened to either of us there would be something left beside socks. Just that night I wanted a baby stuffed in every cranny like money in jars, like hidden bottles of vodka for weak-willed alcoholics.

"I didn't put in my diaphragm," I mumbled w h e n we were through.

You stirred. "Is it dangerous?"

"It's very dangerous," I said. Indeed, just about any stranger could have turned up nine months later. We might as well have left the door unlocked.

T h e next morning, you said while we dressed, "Last night—you didn't just forget?" I shook my head, pleased with myself. "Are you sure about this?"

"Franklin, we're never going to be sure. We have no idea what it's like to have a kid. And there's only one way to find out."

You reached under my arms and lifted me overhead, and I recognized your lit-up expression from w h e n you'd played

"airplane" with Brian's daughters. "Fantastic!"

I had sounded so confident, but w h e n you brought me in for a landing I started to panic. Complacency has a way of restoring itself of its own accord, and I'd already stopped worrying whether you would live through the week. *What had I done*? W h e n later that m o n t h I got my period, I told you I was disappointed. That was my first lie, and it was a whopper.

D u r i n g the following six weeks you applied yourself nighdy.

You liked having a j o b to do and bedded me with the same boisterous if-you're-going-to-do-anything-do-it-right with which you had knocked up our bookshelves. Myself, I wasn't so sure about this yeomanlike fucking. I had always fancied the frivolousness of sex, and I liked it down and dirty. T h e fact that even the Armenian O r t h o d o x Church would n o w look on with hearty approval could put me right out of the m o o d .

Meanwhile, I came to regard my body in a n e w light. For the first time I apprehended the little mounds on my chest as teats for the suckling of young, and their physical resemblance to udders on cows or the swinging distensions on lactating hounds was suddenly unavoidable. Funny h o w even w o m e n forget what breasts are for.

T h e cleft between my legs transformed as well. It lost a certain outrageousness, an obscenity, or achieved an obscenity

of a different sort. T h e flaps seemed to open not to a narrow, snug dead end, but to something yawning. T h e passageway itself became a route to somewhere else, a real place, and not merely to a darkness in my mind. T h e twist of flesh in front took on a devious aspect, its inclusion overtly ulterior, a tempter, a sweetener for doing the species' heavy lifting, like the lollipops I once got at the dentist.

Lo, everything that made me pretty was intrinsic to motherhood, and my very desire that m e n find me attractive was the contrivance of a body designed to expel its o w n replacement.

I don't want to pretend that I ' m the first w o m a n to discover the birds and the bees. But all this was new to me. And frankly, I wasn't so sure about it. I felt expendable, throw-away, swallowed by a big biological project that I didn't initiate or choose, that produced me but would also chew me up and spit me out. I felt used.

I ' m sure you remember those fights about booze. According to you, I shouldn't have been drinking at all. I balked. As soon as I discovered I was pregnant—I was pregnant, I didn't go in for this *we* stuff—I'd go cold turkey. But conception could take years, during which I was not prepared to killjoy my every evening with glasses of milk. Multiple generations of w o m e n had tippled cheerfully through their pregnancies and what, did they all give birth to retards?

You sulked. You went quiet if I poured myself a second glass of wine, and your disapproving glances despoiled the pleasure (as they were meant to). Sullenly, you'd grumble that in my place *you'd* stop drinking, and yes, for years if necessary, about which I had no doubt. I would let parenthood influence our behavior; you would have parenthood dictate our behavior. If that seems a subtle distinction, it is night and day.

I was deprived that cliched cinematic tip-off of heaving over the toilet, but it doesn't appear to be in moviemakers' interests to accept that some w o m e n don't get m o r n i n g sickness. Although you offered to accompany me with my urine sample, I dissuaded

you: "It's not as if I ' m getting tested for cancer or something." I remember the remark. M u c h like what they say in jest, it's telling what people claim something is *not*.

At the gynecologist's, I delivered my marinated artichoke jar, a briskness covering the intrinsic embarrassment of handing off smelly effluents to strangers, and waited in the office. Dr.

Rhinestein——a cold young w o m a n for her profession, with an aloof, clinical temperament that would have suited her better for pharmaceutical trials with rats—swept in ten minutes later and leaned over her desk to jot. "It's positive," she said crisply.

W h e n she looked up, she did a double take. "Are you all right?

You've turned white."

I did feel strangely cold.

"Eva, I thought you were *trying* to get pregnant. This should be good news." She said this severely, with reproach. I got the impression that if I wasn't going to be happy about it, she would take my baby and give it to someone w h o ' d got their m i n d r i g h t — w h o would hop up and d o w n like a game-show contestant who'd w o n the car.

" D r o p your head between your legs." It seems I had begun to weave.

O n c e I had forced myself to sit up, if only because she seemed so bored, Dr. Rhinestein went through a long list of what I couldn't do, what I couldn't eat and drink, w h e n I *would*—

never mind my plans to update "WEEWAP," as the office n o w called our Western European edition, thanks to you—return for my next appointment. This was my introduction to the way in which, crossing the threshold of motherhood, suddenly you b e c o m e social property, the animate equivalent of a public park.

That coy expression "you're eating *for two* now, dear," is all by way of goading that your very dinner is no longer a private affair; indeed, as *the land of the free* has grown increasingly coercive, the inference seems to r u n that "you're eating for *us* now," for 200-some million meddlers, any one of whose prerogative it is to object should you ever be in the m o o d for a jelly donut and not

a full meal with whole grains and leafy vegetables that covers all five major food groups. T h e right to boss pregnant w o m e n around was surely on its way into the Constitution.

Dr. Rhinestein itemized recommended brands of vitamins and lectured on the dangers of continuing to play squash.

I had the afternoon to assemble myself into the glowing m o t h e r -

to-be. Instinctively, I chose a plain cotton sundress more pert than sexy, then gathered the ingredients for a meal that was aggressively nutritious (the sauteed sea trout would be unbreaded, the salad would sport sprouts). In the meantime, I tried on different approaches to a shopworn scene: coy, delayed;bemused, artificially offhand; gushing— *oh, darling!* N o n e of t h e m seemed to suit. As I whisked about the loft twisting fresh candles into holders, I made a brave attempt at h u m m i n g but could only think of show tunes from big-budget musicals like *Hello, Dolly!*

I hate musicals.

Ordinarily, the finishing touch on a festive occasion was choosing the wine. I stared dolefully at our ample rack, b o u n d to gather dust. Some celebration.

W h e n the elevator clanked at our floor, I kept my back turned and arranged my face. W i t h one glance at the tortured collection of conflicting twitches we make w h e n we "arrange" our faces, you spared me the announcement. "You're pregnant."

I shrugged. "Looks that way."

You kissed me, chastely, no tongue. "So w h e n you found o u t — h o w ' d you feel?"

"A bit faint, actually."

Delicately, you touched my hair. "Welcome to your new life."

Since my m o t h e r was as terrified of alcohol as she was of the next street over, a glass of wine had never lost for me its tantalizing quality of the illicit. Although I didn't think I had *a problem,* a long draught of rich red at day's end had long been emblematic to me of adulthood, that vaunted

American Holy Grail of liberty. But I was beginning to intuit that full-blown maturity was not so very 6 3 - -

different from childhood. Both states in their extreme were all about following the rules.

So I poured myself a flute of cranberry juice and toasted, brightly. *"La chaim!"*

Funny h o w you dig yourself into a hole by the teaspoon—the smallest of compromises, the little roundings off or slight recastings of one emotion as another that is a tad nicer or more flattering. I did not care so m u c h about being deprived of a glass of w i n e per se. But like that legendary j o u r n e y that begins with a single step, I had already embarked u p o n my first resentment.

A petty one, but most resentments are. A n d one that for its smallness I felt obliged to repress. For that matter, that is the nature of *resentment*, the objection we cannot express. It is silence more than the complaint itself that makes the emotion so toxic, like poisons the body won't pee away. Hence, hard as I tried to be a grown-up about my cranberry juice, chosen carefully for its resemblance to a young Beaujolais, deep d o w n inside I was a brat.

While you came up with names (for boys), I wracked my brain for what in all this—the diapers, the sleepless nights, the rides to soccer practice—I was meant to be looking forward to.

Eager to participate, you had volunteered to give up booze for my pregnancy, though our baby would be no more bouncing should you forgo your predinner microbrew. So you began festively knocking back cranberry juice to beat the band. You seemed to relish the opportunity to prove h o w little drinking meant to you. I was annoyed.

T h e n , you were always captivated by self-sacrifice. However admirable, your eagerness to give your life over to another person may have been due

in some measure to the fact that w h e n your life was wholly in your lap you didn't k n o w what to do with it.

Self-sacrifice was an easy way out. I k n o w that sounds unkind.

But I do believe that this desperation of yours—to rid yourself of yourself, if that is not too abstract—burdened our son hugely.

You remember that evening? We should have had so m u c h to talk about, but we were awkward, halting. We were no longer

Eva and Franklin, but M o m m y and Daddy; this was our first meal as a *family,* a word and a concept about w h i c h I had always been uneasy And I was short-tempered, discarding all the names you came up with, Steve and George and Mark, as "way too ordinary,"

and you were hurt.

I couldn't talk to you. I felt pent up, clogged. I wanted to say: Franklin, I ' m not sure this is a good idea.You k n o w in your third trimester they won't even let you onto a plane? A n d I hate this whole rectitudinous *thing,* the keeping to a *good* diet and setting a *good* example and finding a *good* school...

It was too late. We were supposed to be celebrating and I was supposed to be elated.

Frantic to recreate the longing for a "backup" that had got me into this, I roused the m e m o r y of the night you were stranded in the pine barrens—*barren,* had that set me off? But that May evening's rash decision had been an illusion. I had made up my m i n d all right, but long before, back w h e n I fell so hard and irrevocably for your guileless American smile, your heartbreaking faith in picnics. However weary I might have grown with writing up n e w countries, over time it is inevitable that food, drink, color,

and trees—the very state of being alive—is no longer fresh. If its shine had tarnished, this was still a life I loved, and one into which children didn't readily fit. T h e single thing I loved more was Franklin Plaskett.You coveted so little; there was only one big-ticket item you wanted that was in my power to provide.

H o w could I have denied you the light in your face w h e n you lifted Brian's squealing litde girls?

W i t h no bottle over w h i c h to linger, we went to b e d on the early side. You were nervous about w h e t h e r we were

"supposed" to have sex, if it would h u r t the baby, and I grew a little exasperated. I was already victimized, like some princess, by an organism the size of a pea. Me, I really wanted to have sex for the first time in weeks, since we could finally fuck because we wanted to get laid and not to do our bit for the race. You acquiesced. But you were depressingly tender.

Though I expected that my ambivalence would evanesce, this conflicted sensation grew only sharper, and therefore more secret.

At last I should come clean. I think the ambivalence didn't go away because it wasn't what it seemed. It is not true that I was

"ambivalent" about motherhood. You wanted to have a child. On balance, I did not. Added together, that seemed like ambivalence, but though we were a superlative couple, we were not the same person. I never did get you to like eggplant.

A

D E C E M B E R 9 , 2 0 0 0

Dear Franklin,

I k n o w I wrote only yesterday, but I n o w depend on this correspondence to debrief from Chatham. Kevin was in a particularly combative humor. R i g h t off the bat he charged, "You never wanted to have me, did you?"

Before being impounded like a pet that bites, Kevin wasn't given to asking me about myself, and I actually took the question as promising. O h , he reached for it in dull restiveness, pacing his cage, but there's something to be said for being bored *out of your mind.* He must have previously recognized that I had a life, in order to go about ruining it with such a sense of purpose. B u t n o w he had further appreciated that I had volition: I'd chosen to have a child and had harbored other aspirations that his arrival might have thwarted. This intuition was at such odds with the therapists' diagnosis of "empathic deficiency" that I felt he deserved an honest reply.

"I thought I did," I said. "And your father, he wanted y o u —desperately."

I looked away; Kevin's expression of sleepy sarcasm was immediate. Perhaps I shouldn't have cited, of all things, your desperation. Me, I loved your longing; I had personally profited from your insatiable loneliness. But children must find such hunger disquieting, and Kevin would routinely translate disquiet into contempt.

"You *thought you did"* he said. "You changed your mind."

"I thought I needed a change," I said. "But no one needs a change for the worse."

Kevin looked victorious. For years he has tempted me to be nasty. I remained factual. Presenting emotions as facts—which they are—affords a fragile defense.

" M o t h e r h o o d was harder than I'd expected," I explained. "I'd been used to airports, sea views, museums. Suddenly I was stuck in the same few rooms, with Lego."

"But I went o u t of my way," he said with a smile that lifted lifelessly as if by hooks, "to keep you entertained."

"I'd anticipated mopping up vomit. Baking Christmas cookies.

I couldn't have expected—" Kevin's look dared me. "I couldn't have expected that simply *forming an attachment* to you," I phrased as diplomatically as I k n e w how, "would be so m u c h work. I t h o u g h t — " I took a breath. "I thought that part came for free."

"Free!" he jeered. "Waking up every m o r n i n g isn't free."

" N o t any more," I conceded dolefully. Kevin's and my experience of day-to-day life has converged. T i m e hangs off me like molting skin.

"Ever occur to you," he said slyly, "maybe I didn't want to have *you?"*

"You wouldn't have liked any other couple better. Whatever they did for a living, you'd think it was stupid."

"Cheapskate travel guides? Scouting another banked turn for a Jeep Cherokee ad? Gotta admit, that's *especially* stupid."

"See?" I exploded. "Honestly, Kevin—would *you* want you?

If there is any justice, you'll wake up one day with *yourself* next to your bed in a crib!"

R a t h e r than recoil or lash out, he went slack. This aspect of his, it's more c o m m o n to the elderly than to children: the eyes glaze and drop, the musculature goes sloppy. It's an apathy so absolute that it's like a hole you might fall in.

You think I was mean to him, and that's w h y he withdrew.

I don't think so. I think he wants me to be mean to h i m the

way other people pinch themselves to make sure they're awake, and if anything he slackened in disappointment that here I was finally pitching a few halfheartedly injurious remarks and he felt nothing. Besides, I expect it was the image of "waking up with yourself " that did it, since that's just what he does do, and w h y his every m o r n i n g feels so cosdy. Franklin, I have never met anyone—and you do *meet* your own children—who found his existence more of a burden or indignity. If you have any notion that I've brutalized our boy into *low self-esteem,* think again. I saw that same sullen expression in his eyes w h e n he was one year old. If anything, he thinks very well of himself, especially since becoming such a celebrity. There is an enormous difference between disliking yourself and simply not wanting to be here.

In parting, I threw him a bone. "I did fight very hard to give you my last name."

"Yeah, well, saved you trouble. T h e old *K-h-a.* ..?" he slurred.

"Thanks to me, n o w everybody in the country knows h o w to spell it."

D i d you k n o w that Americans stare at pregnant women? In the low birthrate First World, gestation is a novelty, and in the days of T & A on

every newsstand, real *pornography*—conjuring intrusively intimate visions of spread hams, incontinent seepage, that eely umbilical slither. Casting my o w n eye d o w n Fifth Avenue as my belly swelled, I would register with incredulity: Every one of these people came from a woman's cunt. In my head, I used the crudest word I could, to bring h o m e the point. Like the purpose of breasts, it's one of those glaring facts we tend to suppress.

Still, I once turned heads with a short skirt, and the flickered glances from strangers in shops began to get on my nerves. Along with the fascination, even enchantment on their faces, I also spotted the incidental shiver of revulsion.

You think that's too strong. I don't. Ever notice h o w many films portray pregnancy as infestation, as colonization by stealth? *Rosemary's Baby* was just the beginning. In *Alien,* a foul extraterrestrial claws its _ _ 6 9 —

way out of John Hurt's belly. In *Mimic,* a woman gives birth to a two-foot maggot. Later, the *X-Files* turned bug-eyed aliens bursting gorily from human midsections into a running theme. In horror and sci-fi, the host is consumed or rent, reduced to husk or residue so that some nightmare creature may survive its shell.

I ' m sorry, but I didn't make these movies up, and any w o m a n whose teeth have rotted, whose bones have thinned, whose skin has stretched, knows the humbling price of a n i n e - m o n t h freeloader.

Those nature films of female salmon battling upstream to lay their eggs only to disintegrate—eyes filming, scales dropping—made me mad. T h e whole time I was pregnant with Kevin I was battling the idea of Kevin, the notion that I had demoted myself from driver to vehicle, from householder to house.

Physically, the experience was easier than I expected. T h e greatest affront of the first trimester was a watery thickening that easily passed as a weakness for Mars bars. My face filled out, beveling my androgynously

angular features into the softer contours of a girl. My face was younger but, I thought, dumber looking.

I don't k n o w what took me so long to notice that you were simply assuming that our baby would take your surname, and even on the Christian name we weren't like-minded. You'd propose *Leonard* or *Peter.* W h e n I countered with *Engin* or *Garabet*—or *Selim,* after my paternal grandfather—you assumed the same tolerant expression I wore w h e n Brian's girls showed me their Cabbage Patch Kids. Finally you said, "You cannot possibly be proposing that I name my son *Garabet Plaskett!'*

" N n o o , " I said .*"Garabet Khatchadourian.* Has more of a ring."

"It has the ring of a kid who's not related to me."

"Funny, that's exactly h o w *Peter Plaskett* sounds to me."

We were at the Beach House, that charming little bar around the corner on Beach Street, no longer extant I ' m afraid, and rather wasted on my orange juice straight up, though they did serve a mean bowl of chili.

You d r u m m e d your fingers. " C a n we at least nix *Plaskett-Khatchadourianl* Because once the hyphenated start marrying each other, kids'll be going by whole p h o n e books. A n d since somebody's gotta lose, it's simplest to stick with tradition."

"According to *tradition,* w o m e n couldn't o w n property until, in some states, the 1970s. *Traditionally* in the Middle East we walk around in a black sack and *traditionally* in Africa we get our clitorises carved out like a h u n k of grisde—"

You stuffed my m o u t h with cornbread. " E n o u g h of the lecture, babe. We're not talking about female circumcision but our kid's last name."

" M e n have always gotten to name children after themselves, while not doing *any of the work."* Cornbread crumbs were sailing from my m o u t h . " T i m e to turn the tables."

" W h y turn t h e m on me? Jesus, you'd think American m e n were pussy-whipped enough. You're the one w h o complains they're all quiche-eating faggots w h o go to crying workshops."

I folded my arms and brought out the heavy artillery. " M y father was b o r n in Dier-ez-Zor concentration camp. T h e camps were riddled with disease and the Armenians had hardly any food or even water—it's amazing the baby survived, because his three brothers didn't. His father, Selim, was shot. Two-thirds of my mother's extended family, the Serafians, was so neady obliterated that not even their stories have survived. I ' m sorry to pull rank. But Anglo-Saxons are hardly an endangered species. My forebears were systematically exterminated, and no one ever even talks about it, Franklin!"

"A *million* and a half people!" you chimed in, gesticulating wildly. " D o you *realize* it was what the Young Turks did to the Armenians in 1915 that gave *Hitler* the *idea* for the *Holocaust?"*•

I glared.

"Eva, your brother's got two kids. There are a million Armenians in the U.S. alone. Nobody's about to disappear."

"But you care about your last name just because it's yours. I care about mine—well, it seems more important."

" M y parents would have a cow. They'd think I was denying them. Or that I was under your thumb. They'd think I was an asshole."

"I should get varicose veins for a *Plaskett*? It's a gross name!"

You looked stung. "You never said you didn't like my name."

" T h a t wide *A*, it's kind of blaring and crass—"

"Crass!"

"It's just so awfully *American.* It reminds me of fat nasal tourists in Nice whose kids all want ice c r e a m . W h o shout, *Honey, look at that 'Pla-a-as-kett'* w h e n it's French and the word's really pronounced *plah-skay."*

"It's not *Plah-skay,* you anti-American prig! It's Plaskett, a small but old and respectable Scottish family, and a name I'd be proud to hand on to my kids! N o w I k n o w w h y you didn't take it w h e n we got married.You hated my name!"

" I ' m sorry! Obviously I love your name in a way, if only because it's *your* n a m e — "

"Tell you what," you proposed; in this country, the injured party enjoyed a big advantage. "If it's a boy, it's a Plaskett. A girl, and you can have your *Khatchadourian."*

I pushed the bread basket aside and jabbed your chest. "So a girl doesn't matter to you. If you were Iranian, she'd be kept h o m e from school. If you were Indian, she'd be sold to a stranger for a cow. If you were Chinese, she'd be starved to death and buried in the backyard—"

You raised your hands. "If it's a *girl* it's a Plaskett, then! But on one condition: N o n e of this *Gara-souvlaki* stuff for a boy's first name. Something *American.* Deal?"

It was a deal. A n d in hindsight we made the right decision.

In 1996, fourteen-year-old Barry Loukaitis killed a teacher and two students while taking a whole class hostage in Moses Lake, Washington. A year later, thirteen-year-old Tronneal M a n g u m shot dead a boy at his middle school w h o owed him $40. T h e next m o n t h , sixteen-year-old Evan Ramsey killed a student and his principal and w o u n d e d two others in Bethel, Alaska.That fall, sixteen-year-old Luke W o o d h a m murdered his mother and two students, w o u n d i n g seven, in Pearl, Mississippi. Two months later; fourteen-year-old Michael Carneal shot dead three students and

w o u n d e d five in Paducah, Kentucky. T h e next spring in 1998, thirteen-year-old Mitchell Johnson and eleven-year-old Andrew Golden opened fire on their high school, killing one teacher and four students, wounding ten, in Jonesboro, Arkansas. A m o n t h after that, fourteen-year-old Andrew Wurst killed a teacher and w o u n d e d three students in Edinboro, Pennsylvania.The following m o n t h in Springfield, Oregon, fifteen-year-old Kip Kinkel massacred both his parents, proceeding to kill two more students and w o u n d i n g twenty-five. In 1999, and a mere ten days after a certain *Thursday,* eighteen-year-old Eric Harris and seventeen-year-old Dylan Klebold planted bombs in their Littleton, Colorado, high school and went on a shooting rampage that killed one teacher and twelve students, while wounding twenty-three, after which they shot themselves. So young Kevin—your choice—-has turned out as American as a Smith and Wesson.

As for his surname, our son has done m o r e to keep the name *Khatchadourian* alive than anyone else in my family.

Like so many of our neighbors w h o latched onto tragedy to stand out from the crowd—slavery, incest, a suicide—I had exaggerated the ethnic chip on my shoulder for effect. I've learned since that tragedy is not to be hoarded. O n l y the untouched, the well-fed and contented, could possibly covet suffering like a designer jacket. I'd readily donate my story to the Salvation Army so that some other f r u m p in need of color could wear it away.

T h e name? I think I just wanted to make the baby mine. I couldn't shake the sensation of having been appropriated. Even w h e n I got the sonogram and Dr. Rhinestein drew her finger around a shifting mass on the monitor, I thought, *Who is that?*

T h o u g h right under my skin, swimming in another world, the f o r m seemed far away. And did a fetus have feelings? I had no way of anticipating that I would still be asking that question about Kevin w h e n he was fifteen.

I confess that w h e n Dr. Rhinestein pointed out the blip between the legs, my heart sank. Although according to o u r " d e a l "

I was n o w bearing a Khatchadourian, just getting my name on the title deeds wasn't going to annex the kid for his mother.

A n d if I enjoyed the company of m e n — I liked their d o w n - t o -

earth quality, I was prone to mistake aggression for honesty, and I disdained daintiness—I wasn't at all sure about *boys*.

W h e n I was eight or nine, and once m o r e sent on some errand by my m o t h e r to fetch something grown-up and complicated, I'd been set u p o n by a group of boys not m u c h older than myself. O h , I wasn't raped; they wrenched up my dress and pulled d o w n my panties, threw a few dirt clods and ran away. Still, I was frightened.

Older, I continued to give wide berth to eleven-year-olds in parks—pointed into bushes with their flies down, leering over their shoulders and sniggering. Even before I had one myself, I was well and truly frightened by boys. A n d nowadays, well, I suppose I ' m frightened by just about everybody.

For all our squinting at the two sexes to blur them into duplicates, few hearts race w h e n passing gaggles of gigghng schoolgirls. But any w o m a n w h o passes a clump of testosterone-drunk punks without picking up the pace, without avoiding the eye contact that might connote challenge or invitation, without sighing inwardly with relief by the following block, is a *zoological* fool. A boy is a dangerous animal.

Is it different for men? I never asked. Perhaps you can see through them, to their private anguish about whether it's normal to have a curved penis, the transparent way they show off for one another (though that's just what I ' m afraid of). Certainly the news that you'd be harboring one of these holy terrors in your o w n h o m e so delighted you that you had to cover your enthusiasm a bit. And the sex of our child made you feel that m u c h more that the baby was yours, yours, *yours*.

Honesdy, Franklin, your proprietary attitude was grating. If I ever cut it close crossing the street, you weren't concerned for my personal safety but were outraged at my irresponsibility.These

"risks" I took—and I regarded as going about my regular life—seemed in your mind to exhibit a cavalier attitude toward one of your personal belongings. Every time I walked out the door, I swear you glowered a little, as if I were bearing away one of your prized possessions without asking.

You wouldn't even let me *dance*, Franklin! Really, there was one afternoon that my subtle but unrelenting anxiety had mercifully lifted. I put on our Talking Heads' *Speaking in Tongues* and began buoyantly herky-jerkying around our underfurnished loft. T h e album was still on the first song, " B u r n i n g D o w n the House,"

and I'd barely worked up a sweat w h e n the elevator clanked and in you marched. W h e n you lifted the needle preemptorily, you scratched a groove, so that forever after the song would skip and keep repeating, *Baby what did you expect* and never make it to *Gonna burst into fla-ame* without my depressing the cartridge gently with a forefinger.

"Hey!" I said."What was that about?"

" W h a t the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"For once I was having a good time. Is that illegal?"

You grabbed my upper arm. "Are you trying to have a miscarriage? Or do you just get a kick out of tempting fate?"

I wrestled free. "Last time I read, pregnancy wasn't a prison sentence."

"Leaping around, throwing yourself all over the f u r n i t u r e — "

" O h , get out, Franklin. N o t that long ago w o m e n worked in the fields right up until giving birth and then squatted between rows of vegetables. In the olden days, kids really did come from the cabbage p a t c h — "

" I n the *olden days* infant and maternal mortality were sky high!"

" W h a t do you care about maternal mortality? So long as they scoop the kid out of my lifeless body while its heart is still beating you'll be happy as a clam."

"That's a hideous thing to say."

" I ' m in the m o o d to be hideous," I said blackly, plopping onto the couch. " T h o u g h before Papa D o c came home, I was in a great mood."

"Two more months. Is it that big a sacrifice to take it easy for the well-being of a whole other person?"

Boy, was I already sick of having the *well-being of a whole other person* held over my head. "My well-being, apparently, n o w counts for beans."

"There's no reason you can't listen to music—although at a volume that doesn't have J o h n thumping his ceiling downstairs."

You replaced the needle at the beginning of the A side, turning it down so low that David Byrne sounded like Minnie Mouse.

"But like a normal pregnant woman, you can sit there and *tap your foot!'*

"I don't k n o w about that," I said. "All the vibration—it might travel up to Little Lord Fauntleroy and trouble his beauty sleep.

And aren't we supposed to be listening to Mozart? Maybe Talking Heads isn't in T h e Book. Maybe by playing 'Psycho Killer' we're feeding h i m Bad Thoughts. Better look it up."

You were the one powering through all those parental h o w -

tos, about breathing and teething and weaning, while I read a history of Portugal.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Eva. I thought the whole idea of becoming parents was to grow up."

"If I'd realized that's what it meant to you, affecting some phony, killjoy adulthood, I'd have reconsidered the whole business."

" D o n ' t you *ever say that"* you said, your face beet-red. "It's too late for second thoughts. *Never, ever* tell me that you regret our own kid."

That's w h e n I started to cry. W h e n I had shared with you my most sordid sexual fantasies, in such disturbing violation of heterosexual norms that, without the assist of your o w n disgraceful mental smut shared in return, I ' m too embarrassed to mention t h e m here—since w h e n was there anything that one of us was *never, ever* to say?

Baby what did you expect—Baby what did you expect—

T h e track had started to skip.

4

— 76 —

D E C E M B E R 1 2 , 2 0 0 0

Dear Franklin,

Well, I had no desire to linger at the agency today T h e staff has gone from good-hearted jousting to all-out war. Observing the showdowns in our small office without taking sides has lent these scenes the slightly comic, unaffecting quality of television with the sound off.

I ' m a little at a loss as to h o w "Florida" has b e c o m e a race issue, except in the way that sooner or later everything becomes a race issue in this country—sooner, as a rule. So the three other Democrats here have been throwing terms like "Jim C r o w " at the two beleaguered Republicans, w h o huddle together in the back r o o m and speak in low

tones that the rest construe as the conspiratorial mutter of shared bigotry. Funny; before the election n o n e of these people displayed the least interest in w h a t was generally agreed to be a dreary contest.

Anyway, today some Supreme C o u r t decision was due, and the radio was on all day. T h e staff s recriminations flew so fast and furious that m o r e than one customer, abandoned at the counter, simply walked out. At length I did the same. Whereas the two conservatives tend to argue nakedly for *their side*, the liberals are always weighing in on behalf of truth, justice, or humanity. T h o u g h once a staunch D e m o c r a t , I long ago gave up on defending humanity. It's beyond me on most days to defend myself.

— 129 —

T h e n , while I do hope this correspondence hasn't degenerated into shrill self-justification, I w o r r y equally that I may seem to be laying the groundwork for claiming that Kevin is all my fault. I do indulge that sometimes, too, gulping d o w n blame with a powerful thirst. But I did say *indulge*. There's a self-aggrandizement in these wallowing mea culpas, a vanity. Blame confers an awesome power.

And it's simplifying, not only to onlookers and victims but to culprits most of all. It imposes order on slag. Blame conveys clear lessons in which others may take comfort: *if only she hadn't*—, and by implication makes tragedy avoidable.There may even be a fragile peace to be f o u n d in the assumption of total responsibility, and I see that calm in Kevin on occasion. It is an aspect that his keepers confuse with remorselessness.

But for me this greedy gorging on fault never works. I am never able to get the fall story inside me. It's larger than I am. It has damaged too many people, aunts and cousins and best friends w h o m I will never k n o w and would n o t recognize if we met. I cannot at once contain the suffering of so many family dinners with one empty chair. I haven't anguished that the p h o t o on the piano is forever tainted because that was the snapshot given to the newspapers or because sibling portraits on either side c o n -

tinue to mark occasions of greater maturity—college graduations, weddings—while the static high school yearbook p h o t o loses color in the sun. I haven't been privy to the m o n t h - b y - m o n t h deterioration of marriages once robust; I haven't sniffed the sickly sweet waft of gin off the breath of a formerly industrious realtor at advancingly earlier hours of the afternoon. I haven't felt the weight of all those cartons dragged into a van after a neighborhood lush with oaks, bubbling with smooth-rocked creeks, and alive with the laughter of other people's healthy children has suddenly become intolerable overnight. It seems as if for me to feel guilty in any meaningful way, I should have to suspend all these losses in my head. Yet like those car games in w h i c h you recite, *I'm going on a trip, and I'm going to take an ambling aardvark, a babbling baby, a capering caterpillar...,* I always blank on an element or two

before the end of the alphabet. I start to juggle Mary's unnaturally beautiful daughter, the Fergusons' short-sighted computer whiz kid, the Corbitts' gangling redhead w h o was always overacting in school plays, and then I throw in that uncannily gracious English teacher Dana R o c c o and the balls fall on the floor.

Of course, just because I can't manage to swallow all the blame doesn't mean that others won't heap it on me anyway, and I'd have been glad to provide a useful receptacle if I thought the heaping did them any good. I always c o m e back to Mary Woolford, whose experience of injustice had hitherto r u n to a particularly inconvenient one-way street. I suppose I'd call her spoiled; she did stir up rather an excessive fuss w h e n Laura didn't make the track team, even though her daughter, however lovely, was physically languid and not the least athletic. B u t it may not be fair to call it a character flaw that someone's life has always gone weE with minimal impedance. Moreover, she was a restive woman, and like my Democratic coworkers given to indignation by nature. Previous to *Thursday,* she had been accustomed to venting this quantity, which I presume would otherwise build up in her at combustive levels, on campaigns to have the town council put in a pedestrian crossing or to ban homeless shelters from Gladstone;

consequently, the denial of funds for such a crossing or the arrival of hairy riffraff on the outskirts of town had previously constituted her version of catastrophe. I ' m not sure h o w such people manage to get their heads around proper disaster after having repeatedly exercised the full powers of their consternation on traffic.

So I can see h o w a w o m a n w h o ' d long slept restlessly on peas might have difficulty lying on an anvil. Nevertheless, it's a pity that she couldn't remain within the still, serene well of sheer incomprehension. O h , I realize you can't stay bewildered—the need to understand or at least to pretend you do is too great—but I myself have found wide white mystification a place in my mind that is blessedly quiet. And I fear that Mary's alternative outrage, her evangelical fever to bring the guilty to book, is a clamorous place that creates the illusion of a journey, a goal to be achieved, only so long as that goal remains out of reach. Honestly, I had to fight the impulse at the civil trial to take her aside and charge gently, "You can't imagine that you'll feel better if you win, do you?" In fact, I became convinced that she would find more consolation in having what proved a surprisingly slight parental negligence case dismissed, because then she'd be able to nurture this theoretical alternative universe in which she had successfully unloaded her agony onto a callous, indifferent m o t h e r w h o deserved it. Somehow Mary seemed confused as to what the problem was. T h e problem was not w h o was punished for what. T h e problem was that her daughter was dead. Although I couldn't have been more sympathetic, it was not subject to unloading onto anyone else.

Besides, I might be more kindly disposed to this ultra-secular notion that whenever bad things happen someone must be held accountable if a curious little halo of blamelessness did not seem to surround those very people w h o perceive themselves as bordered on every side by agents of wickedness. That is, it seems to be the same folks w h o are inclined to sue builders w h o did not perfecdy protect them from the depredations of an earthquake w h o will be the first to claim that their son failed his math test because of attention deficit disorder, and not because he spent the night before at a video arcade instead of studying complex fractions. Further, if underlying this huffy relationship to cataclysm—the hallmark of the American middle class—were a powerful conviction that bad things simply shouldn't happen,

period, I might find the naivete disarming. B u t the core conviction of these incensed sorts—who greedily rubberneck interstate pileups—seems rather that bad things shouldn't happen to *them.* Lastly, though you k n o w I've never been especially religious after having all that O r t h o d o x guff forced on me as a child (though luckily by the time I was eleven, my mother could no longer brave the church a whole four blocks away and held halfhearted "services" at home), I still wonder at a race grown so anthrocentric that all events from

volcanoes to global temperature shift have become matters for which its individual members are answerable. T h e species itself is an act, for lack of a better word, of God. Personally, I would argue that the births of single dangerous children are acts of God as well, but therein lay our court case.

Harvey thought from the start that I should settle. You remember Harvey Landsdown;you thought he was self-important.

He is, but he told such marvelous stories. N o w he goes to other people s dinner parties and tells stories about me.

Harvey did rattle me a bit, since he's a get-to-the-point type.

In his office, I stumbled and digressed; he messed with papers, implying that I was wasting his time or my money—same thing.

We were at odds on our understanding of what constitutes truth.

He wanted gist. Me, I think you only get at gist by assembling all the tiny inconclusive anecdotes that would fall flat at a dinner table and that seem irrelevant until you collect them in a pile.

Maybe that's what I'm attempting here, Franklin, because though I tried to answer his questions directly, whenever I made simple, exculpatory

statements like,"Of course I love my son," I felt that I was lying and that any judge or jury would be able to tell.

Harvey didn't care. He's one of those attorneys w h o think of the law as a game, not as a morality play. I'm told that's the kind you want. Harvey is fond of declaiming that being in the right never won anyone's case, and he even left me with the unfocused sense that having justice on your side is a faint disadvantage.

Of course, I was not at all sure that justice was on my side, and Harvey found my hand-wringing tedious. He commanded me to stop dithering about h o w it looked, accepting a reputation as a Bad Mother, and he clearly couldn't have cared less about whether I really was a bad mother. (And Franklin, I was. I was terrible at it. I wonder if you can ever forgive me.) His reasoning was straightforward economics, and I gather this is how many suits are decided. He advised that we could probably pay off the parents out of court for a great deal less than a sentimental j u r y might award. Crucially, there was no guarantee that we'd

be compensated for court costs even if we won. So that means, I sorted out slowly, that in this country where you're "innocent until proven guilty" someone can accuse me of whatever he wants and I could be out hundreds of thousands even if I prove the accusation groundless? Welcome to the U.S. of A., he said gaily. I miss you to rail to. Harvey wasn't interested in my exasperation. He found these legal ironies amusing, because it was not his company started from a single discount plane ticket that was on the line.

Looking back, Harvey was absolutely right—about the money, that is. And I have reflected since on what drove me to make Mary take her case against me to trial in defiance of sound legal counsel. I must have been angry. If I had done anything wrong, it seemed to me that I had already been punished roundly. No court could have sentenced me to anything worse than this arid life in my poky duplex, with my chicken breast and cabbage, my tremulous halogen bulbs, my robotic biweekly visits to Chatham—or perhaps even

worse, to nearly sixteen years of living with a son who, as he asserted, did not want me as a mother and w h o gave me almost daily good reason to not want him as a son. All the same, I really ought to have worked out for myself that if a jury's damning verdict would never assuage Mary's grief, a more kindly judgment would never temper my own sense of complicity, either. I'm sad to say that I must have been motivated in some not inconsiderable part by a desperation to be publicly exonerated.

Alas, it was not public exoneration that I truly craved, which may be why I sit here night after night and try to record every incriminating detail. Look at this sorry specimen: As a mature, happily married woman of nearly thirty-seven, she is informed of her first pregnancy and almost faints in horror, a response she disguises from her delighted husband with a pert gingham sundress. Blessed with the miracle of new life, she chooses to dwell instead on a forgone glass of wine and the veins in her legs. She throws herself about her living room to the tune of tawdry popular music with no thought of her u n b o r n child. At a time that she ought best to be learning in her very gut the true meaning of *ours,* she chooses instead to fret about whether the forthcoming baby is *hers.* Even beyond the point at which she should have more than learned her lesson, she is still banging on about a movie in which h u m a n birth is confused with the expulsion of an oversized maggot. A n d she's a hypocrite who's impossible to please: After admitting that flitting about the globe is not the magical mystery tour she once pretended it was—that these superficial peripatetics have in fact b e c o m e trying and m o n o t o n o u s — t h e m o m e n t this gadding about is imperiled by the needs of someone else, she starts swooning over the halcyon life she once led w h e n jotting d o w n w h e t h e r Yorkshire youth hostels provide kitchen facilities. Worst of all, before her hapless son has even managed to survive the inhospitable climate of her clenched, reluctant womb, she has committed what you yourself, Franklin, deemed the officially unspeakable: She has capriciously changed her mind, as if children are merely little outfits you can try on back h o m e and—after turning critically before the mirror to conclude, no, sorry, it's a pity but this really just doesn't quite *suit*—cart back to the store.

I recognize that the portrait I'm painting here is not *attractive,* and for that matter I can't remember the last time I felt attractive, to myself or anyone

else. In fact, years before I got pregnant myself I met a young w o m a n at the W h i t e Horse in the Village with w h o m I'd gone to college in Green Bay. T h o u g h we hadn't spoken since then, she had recently given birth to her o w n first child, and I needed only to say hi for her to begin spewing her despair. Compact, with unusually broad shoulders and close curly black hair, Rita was an attractive w o m a n — i n the physical sense. W i t h no solicitation on my part she regaled me with the irreproachable state of her physique before she conceived.

Apparently she'd been using the Nautilus every day, and her definition had never been so sharp, her fat-to-muscle ratio was unreal, her aerobic conditioning topping the charts.

T h e n pregnancy, well it was *terriblel* T h e Nautilus just didn't *feel good* any more and she'd had to stop—. Now, now, she was a *mess,* she could hardly do a *sit-up,* m u c h less three sets of proper crunches, she was starting from scratch or *worse*—! This w o m a n was fuming, Franklin; she clearly muttered about her abdominal muscles w h e n she seethed down the street. Yet at no point did she mention the name of her child, its sex, its age, or its father. I remember stepping back, excusing myself to the bar, and slipping away without telling Rita good-bye. W h a t had most mortified me, what I had to flee, was that she sounded not only unfeeling and narcissistic *but just like me.*

I ' m no longer sure whether I rued our first child before he was even born. It's hard for me to reconstruct that period without contaminating the memories with the outsized regret of later years, a regret that bursts the constraints of time and gushes into the period w h e n Kevin wasn't there yet to wish away. But the last thing I've wanted is to whitewash my o w n part in this terrible story. That said, I ' m determined to accept due responsibility for every wayward thought, every petulance, every selfish m o m e n t , not in order to gather all the blame to myself but to admit *this* is my fault and *that* is my fault but *there, there,* precisely *there* is where I draw a line and on the other side, *that, that,* Franklin, *that* is *not.*

Yet to draw that line I fear I must advance to its very edge.

By the last month, the pregnancy was almost fun. I was so ungainly that the condition had a goofy novelty, and for a w o m a n w h o had always been so conscientiously trim there was a relief to be found in becoming a cow. H o w the other half lives, if you will—more than half, I gather, as of 1998, the first year in which more people in the U.S. were officially fat than not.

Kevin was two weeks late. Looking back, I am superstitiously convinced that he was foot-dragging even in the womb—-that he was hiding. Perhaps I was n o t the only party to this experiment w h o had reservations.

W h y were you never tortured with our foreboding? I had

to discourage you from buying so many bunnies and buggies and Huggy Snuggy afghans before the birth. What if, I noted, something goes wrong? Couldn't you be setting yourself up for a fall? You pished that to plan on disaster was to court it. (Hence, in contemplating a darker twin of the dazzlingly hale and happy boy you were counting on, I allowed the changeling into the world.) I was the over-thirty-five mother keen on getting the fetus tested for Downs; you were adamantly opposed. All they can give you is a percentage chance, you argued. Are you going to tell me that if it's one in 500 you'll go ahead, but one in fifty and it's flush and start again? Of course not, I said. O n e in ten, then. O n e in three. What's the cutoff? W h y force yourself to make that kind of choice?

Your arguments were convincing, though I wonder if

behind them didn't lurk a poorly thought out romance with the handicapped child: one of those clumsy but sweet-tempered emissaries of God w h o teaches his parents that there's so much more to life than smarts, a guileless soul w h o is smothered in the same hair-tousling affection lavished on a family pet. Thirsty to quaff whatever funky genetic cocktail our D N A served up, you must have flirted with the prospect of all those bonus points

for self-sacrifice: Your patience w h e n it takes our darling dunderhead six months of daily lessons to tie his shoes proves superhuman.

Unstinting and fiercely protective, you discover in yourself a seemingly bottomless well of generosity on which your I'm-leaving-for-Guyana-tomorrow wife never draws, and at length you abandon location scouting, the better to devote yourself full-time to our five-foot-something three-year-old. T h e neighbors all extol your make-the-best-of-it resignation to the hand Life has dealt, the roll-with-the-punches maturity with which you face what others in our race and class would find a crippling body blow. You were just desperate to throw yourself into this parenting business, weren't you? To plunge from a cliff, to pitch yourself on a pyre. Was our life together that unbearable to you, that bleak?

I never told you, but I got the test behind your back. T h e optimism of its result (about one in 100) allowed me to once more elude the enormity of our differences. Me, I was picky.

My approach to parenthood was conditional, and the conditions were strict. I did not want to mother an imbecile or a paraplegic; whenever I saw fatigued women wheeling their stick-limbed progeny with muscular dystrophy for water therapy at Nyack Hospital, my heart didn't melt, it sank. Indeed, an honest list of all that I did not want to nurture, from the garden-variety moron to the grotesquely overweight, might run damningly to a second page. In retrospect, however, my mistake was not that I got the test in secret but that I found reassurance in its result. Dr.

Rhinestein did not test for malice, for spiteful indifference, or for congenital meanness. If they could, I wonder how many fish we might throw back.

As for the birth itself, I had always played up a macho attitude toward pain that merely betrayed that I'd never suffered from a debilitating illness, broken a single bone, or emerged from a four-car pileup. Honestly, Franklin, I don't know where I got this idea of myself as so tough. I was the Mary Woolford of the physical world. My concept of pain derived from stubbed toes, skinned elbows, and menstrual cramps. I knew what it was

like to feel a litde achy after the first day of a squash season; I had no idea what it was like to lose a hand to industrial machinery or to have a leg run over by the Seventh Avenue IRT. Nevertheless, how eagerly we buy into one another's mythologies, no matter how farfetched. You accepted my blase response to cut fingers in the kitchen—a transparent bid for your admiration, my dear—as sufficient evidence that I would force a form the size of a standing rib roast through an orifice that had previously accommodated nothing larger than a bratwurst with equal stoicism. It simply went without saying that I would shun anesthetics.

I cannot for the life of me understand what we were trying to prove. For your part, maybe that I was the heroic larger-than-life that you wanted to have married. For my part, I may

have got sucked into that litde competition b e t w e e n w o m e n about childbirth. Even Brian's demure wife Louise a n n o u n c e d that she had managed a twenty-six-hour labor w i t h Kiley while soothed only by "raspberry leaf tea," a treasured family factoid that she repeated on three separate occasions. It was encounters of this variety that swelled the ranks of the natural childbirth course I t o o k at the N e w School, t h o u g h I wager that m a n y of those students w h o talked this "I w a n t to k n o w what it feels like" game broke d o w n and begged for an epidural at the first contraction.

N o t me. I wasn't brave, but I was stubborn and prideful. Sheer obstinacy is far more durable than courage, though it's not as pretty.

So the first time my insides twisted as if r u n g like a wet sheet, my eyes bulged slighdy, the lids widening in surprise; my hps compressed. I impressed you with my calm. I meant to. We were lunching at the Beach House again, and I decided against finishing my chili. In a show of returning equanimity, you dispatched a piece of cornbread before retreating to the rest r o o m for a f o o t -

high stack of freshly banded paper towels; my water had broken, gallons of it, or so it seemed, and I had drenched the bench. You paid the bill and even remembered to leave a tip before leading me by the hand back to our loft, checking your watch. We were not going to embarrass ourselves by turning up at Beth Israel hours before my cervix had begun to dilate.

Later that afternoon, as you drove me across Canal Street in your baby-blue pickup, you mumbled that everything would be all right, though you had no way of knowing. At admissions, I was struck by the commonplace character of my condition; the nurse yawned, fortifying my resolve that I would prove an exemplary patient. I would astound Dr. Rhinestein with my gruff practicality. I k n e w this was a natural process, and I was not going to make a fuss. So w h e n another contraction doubled me as if I had just been caught unawares by a right hook, I merely exhaled a litde *hoof*.

— 87 —

It was all a ridiculous and perfecdy pointless act. There was no reason to try to amaze Dr. Rhinestein, w h o m I did not especially like. If I intended to do you proud, you were getting a son out of the bargain, sufficient payoff to put up with a little screaming and rudeness. It might even have done you good to recognize that the w o m a n you married was an ordinary mortal w h o adored comfort and hated suffering and so would opt sanely for anesthetic. Instead I made feeble jokes on my stretcher in the corridor, and I held your hand. That was the hand that you told me afterward I very nearly broke.

O h , Franklin, there is no use pretending now. It was awful. I may be capable of toughness in respect to certain kinds of pain, but if so, my fortitude dwells in my calves or forearms but not between my legs. This was not a part of my body that I had ever associated with endurance, with anything so odious as exercise.

And as the hours dragged on, I began to suspect that I was just too old for this, that I was too inelastic approaching forty to stretch to this n e w life. Dr. Rhinestein said, primly, that I was small, as if to indicate an inadequacy,

and after about fifteen hours, she despaired sternly, *Eva! You really must make an effort.* So m u c h for earning her amazement.

There were times after about twenty-four hours that a few tears would leak d o w n my temples, and I hastily wiped t h e m away, n o t wanting you to see. M o r e than once I was offered an epidural, and my determination to forgo its deliverance acquired a demented aspect. I seized on this refusal, as if passing this little test were the point, and not passing an infant son. So long as I declined the needle, I was winning.

In the end it was the threat of a cesarean that did it; Dr.

Rhinestein made no bones about the fact that she had other patients back at her office and that she was disgusted by my lackluster performance. I had an abnormal horror of being sliced open. I didn't want the scar; like Rita, I ' m ashamed to say, I feared for my stomach muscles; and the procedure was too reminiscent of all those horror films.

So I *made an effort,* at w h i c h point I had to recognize that I'd been resisting the birth. W h e n e v e r the e n o r m o u s mass approached that tiny canal, I'd been sucking it back. Because it hurt. It hurt a *whole lot.* In that N e w School course, they d r u m m e d into you that the pain was *good,* you were supposed to *go with it,* push *into the pain,* and only on my back did I contemplate what retarded advice this was. Pain *,goodP.* I was overcome with contempt. In fact, I never told you this before, but the emotion on which I fastened in order to push beyond a critical threshold was *loathing.* I despised being spread out like some farm exhibit with strangers gawking between my canted knees. I detested Dr.

Rhinestein s pointed, ratlike little face and her brisk, censorious manner. I hated myself for ever having agreed to this humiliating theater, w h e n I was *fine* before and right at this m o m e n t I could have been in *France.* I repudiated all my female friends, w h o used to share their reservations about supply-side economics or at least halfheartedly ask after my last trip abroad, yet for months n o w had only nattered about stretch marks and remedies for constipation or gaily brandished horror stories about terminal

preeclampsia and autistic offspring w h o would do nothing but rock back and forth all day and bite their hands. Your eternally hopeful, encouraging expression made me *sick.* All very easy for you to want to be a *Daddy,* to buy into all that stuffed-bunny schlock, w h e n I was the one w h o had to blow up like a sow, I was the one w h o had to turn into a goody-two-shoes teetotaler sucking d o w n vitamins, I was the one w h o had to watch her breasts get puffy and bloated and sore w h e n they used to be so neat and close, and I was the one w h o would be ripped to ribbons ramming a watermelon through a passage the size of a garden hose. I did, I hated you and your litde coos and mumbles, I wished you'd stop patting my brow with that damp washcloth as if it made the slightest bit of difference, and I think I k n e w I was hurting your hand. And yes, I even hated the baby—which so far had not brought me hope for the future and *story* and content and "a turn of the page" but unwieldiness and embarrassment

and a rumbling subterranean tremor quaking through the very ocean floor of w h o I thought I was.

But pushing past that threshold I met such a red blaze of agony that I could no longer afford the expenditure of loathing. I screamed, and I didn't care. I'd have done anything in that instant to get it to stop: hocked my company, sold our child into slavery, committed my soul to hell. "Please—," I gasped, "give me—that epidural!"

Dr. Rhinestein chided, "It's too late for that now, Eva, if you couldn't take it you should have said so earlier. The baby is crowning. For pity's sake don't let up *now."*

And suddenly it was over. Later we'd joke about how long I held out and how I begged for relief only once it was withdrawn, but at the time it wasn't funny. In the very instant of his birth, I associated Kevin with my own limitations—with not only suffering, but defeat.

D E C E M B E R 1 3 , 2 0 0 0

Dear Franklin,

W h e n I walked into work this m o r n i n g I could tell immediately from a malignant Democratic sullenness that "Florida" was over.

T h e sense of letdown in both camps feels postpartum.

B u t if my coworkers of both stripes are disappointed that such an invigorating affray is finished, I feel a measure more disconsolate still, banished even from their shared, binding sense of loss. Multiplied by many times, this loneliness of mine must approximate my mother's experience of the end of the war, for my birthday of August 15 coincides with VJ-Day, w h e n Hirohito broadcast his surrender to the Japanese. Apparently the nurses were so ecstatic that it was hard to get them to attend to the timing of her contractions. Listening to champagne corks pop d o w n the hall, she must have felt so dolefully left out. M a n y of the nurses'

husbands would be coming home, but my father would not. If the rest of the country had w o n the war, the Khatchadourians of Racine, Wisconsin, had lost.

Later she must have felt similarly at odds with the sentiments embalmed by the commercial greeting card company for which she went to work (anything but Johnson Wax). H o w eerie, boxing other people's Happy Anniversary tributes and having no need to slip one in her purse w h e n the date came around in her own home. I ' m of two minds as to whether I should be glad that the j o b gave her the idea of starting her o w n handcrafted greeting-

card business, which allowed her to withdraw to Enderby Avenue in perpetuity. But I will say that the " O n the Birth ofYour First Baby" card that she made up especially for me—layered with bled tissue in blues and greens—well, it was lovely.

In fact, w h e n my head cleared in Beth Israel, I remembered my mother and felt ungrateful. My father had been unable to hold her hand as you held mine. Yet, offered the clasp of a living husband, I crushed it.

Still, we all know that women in labor can grow abusive, so I'm tempted to admit to having gotten a little hostile in the thick of things, and to leave my confession at that. After all, I was immediately abashed and kissed you. This was before the days w h e n doctors slid a newborn right onto the mother's breast, gore and all, and we had a few minutes while they tied the cord and cleaned him up. I was excited, stroking and squeezing your arm, nesding my forehead into the soft inside of your elbow. I had never held our child.

But I cannot let myself off the hook so lightly.

Up until April 11, 1983, I had flattered myself that I was an exceptional person. But since Kevin's birth I have come to suppose that we are all profoundly normative. (For that matter, thinking of one's self as exceptional is probably more the rule than not.) We have explicit expectations of ourselves in specific situations—beyond expectations; they are requirements. Some of these are small: If we are given a surprise party, we will be delighted. Others are sizable: If a parent dies, we will be grief-stricken. But perhaps in tandem with these expectations is the private fear that we will fail convention in the crunch. That we will receive the fateful phone call and our mother is dead and we feel nothing. I wonder if this quiet, unutterable little fear is even keener than the fear of the bad news itself: that we will discover ourselves to be monstrous. If it does not seem too shocking, for the duration of our marriage I lived with one terror: that if something happened to you it would break me. But there was always

an odd shadow, an underfear, if you will, that it would not—that I would swing off blithely that afternoon to play squash.

T h e fact that this *underfear* rarely becomes overweening proceeds from a crude trust. You have to keep faith that if the unthinkable does come to pass, despair will come crashing in of its o w n accord; that grief, for example, is n o t an experience you need s u m m o n or a skill you need practice, and the same goes for prescriptive joy.

Thus even tragedy can be accompanied by a trace of relief.

T h e discovery that heartbreak is indeed heartbreaking consoles us about our humanity (though considering what people get up to, that's a queer word to equate with compassion, or even with emotional competence). By way of a ready example, take yesterday, Franklin. I was driving to work on R o u t e 9W w h e n a Fiesta turned right, cutting off a bicycle on the shoulder. T h e passenger door made a pretzel of the bike's front wheel, flipping the cyclist over the roof. He landed in a position that was subtly impossible, as if sketched by an unpromising art student. I'd already driven by, but in my rearview mirror, three other cars behind me pulled onto the shoulder to help.

It seems perverse to find solace in such misfortune. Yet presumably n o n e of the drivers w h o descended to ring emergency services k n e w this cyclist personally or had any vested interest in his fate. Still, they cared enough to inconvenience themselves potentially to the point of having to testify in court. On my o w n account, the drama left me physically shaken—my hands trembled on the wheel, my m o u t h dropped and went dry. B u t I had acquitted myself well. I still blanch at the agony of strangers.

Yet I do k n o w what it's like to get off-script. Surprise party?

Funny I should have cited that. T h e week I was to turn ten I sensed something was up. There were whispers, a closet I was directed to avoid. If that weren't enough wink-and-nod, Giles crooned, "You're going to be surprised!"The second week of August I k n e w what signal day was approaching, and by the time it came around I was bursting.

Early afternoon of my birthday, I was ordered to the backyard.

"Surprise! " W h e n I was invited back in, I discovered that five of my friends had been sneaked in the front while I'd been trying to peek through the drawn kitchen curtains. In our bunted living room, they surrounded a card table spread with a paper lace cloth and set with colorful paper plates, beside which my mother had placed matching seating cards inscribed with the fluid calligraphy of her professional work. There were also store-bought party favors: miniature bamboo umbrellas, noisemakers that tongued and honked. The cake, too, was from a bakery, and she had dyed the lemonade a vivid pink to make it seem more festive.

Doubtless my mother saw my face fall. Children are so lousy at covering up. At the party, I was desultory, laconic. I opened and closed my umbrella and rapidly tired of it, which was odd; I had powerfully envied other girls w h o had gone to parties to which I hadn't been invited and returned to school with precisely these pink-and-blue parasols.Yet somehow it was revealed to me that they came in packets o f t e n in a plastic bag and could be purchased even by the likes of us, and that devalued the favors more than I could say. Two of the guests I did not much like; parents never get it right about your friends.The cake was sealed in fondant icing like a plastic puck, and flavorlessly sweet; my mother's baking was better. There were more presents than usual, but all I remember of them is that each was unaccountably disappointing. And I was visited by a prescient taste of adulthood, an unbracketed " N o Exit" sensation, which rarely plagues children: that we were sitting in a room and there was nothing to say or do. The minute it was over, the floor messy with crumbs and wrapping, I cried.

I must sound spoiled, but I wasn't spoiled. Little had been made of my birthdays in the past. Looking back, I feel simply despicable, too. My mother had gone to so much trouble. Her business didn't make much money for the longest time; she would labor over one card for over an hour and then sell it for a quarter, a price at which her customers would still squawk. In terms of

our family's midget economy, the outlay had been considerable.

She must have been bewildered; if she were a different sort of parent, she'd have spanked my ungrateful behind. Whatever had I contemplated that in comparison made my surprise party such a letdown?

N o t h i n g . Or nothing in particular, nothing that I could f o r m concretely in my head.That was the problem. I had been awaiting something large and amorphous, a vast big thing so marvelous that I could not even imagine it. T h e party she threw was all too imaginable. For that matter, had she brought in a brass b a n d and magicians I'd have still been crestfallen.There was no extravagance that would not have fallen short, because it would be finite and fixed, one thing and not another. It would be only what it was.

T h e point is, I don't k n o w what exactly I'd foreseen would happen to me w h e n Kevin was first hoisted to my breast. I hadn't foreseen anything *exactly.* I wanted what I could not imagine. I wanted to be transformed; I wanted to be transported. I wanted a door to open and a whole n e w vista to expand before me that I had never k n o w n was out there. I wanted nothing short of revelation, and revelation by its nature cannot be anticipated; it promises that to which we are not yet privy. But if I extracted one lesson from my tenth birthday party, it was that expectations are dangerous w h e n they are b o t h high and u n f o r m e d .

I may have misrepresented myself here. Of course I had misgivings. But my expectations of m o t h e r h o o d *were* high, or I wouldn't have agreed to go through with it. I'd attended hungrily to accounts from friends: *You have no idea what it's like until you have one of your own.* Whenever I allowed that I was less than enamored of infants and small children, I was assured: *I felt the same way! Couldn't stand other people's kids! But it's different—it's totally different—when they're yours.* I loved that, the prospect of *another country,* a strange land in which insolent miscreants were miraculously alchemized into, as you had said yourself, an answer to the "Big Question."

Indeed, I may even have misrepresented my feelings about foreign countries. Yes, I was suffering travel fatigue, and yes, I did always fight a hereditary dread before h o p -

ping a plane. But setting foot in Namibia, or H o n g Kong, even Luxembourg for the first time made me high as a kite.

Wlrat I hadn't realized, Brian had confided, *is that you fall in love with your own children. You don't just love them. You fall in love.*

And that moment, when you lay eyes on them for the first time—it's indescribable. I do wish he had described it anyway. I do wish he had given it a try.

Dr. Rhinestein dangled the infant over my breast and rested the tiny creature d o w n w i t h — I was glad to see her evidence it at last—painstaking gentleness. Kevin was damp, and blood creased his neck, the crooks of his limbs. I put my hands diffidently around him. T h e expression on his twisted face was disgruntled.

His body was inert; I could only interpret his lassitude as a lack of enthusiasm. Sucking is one of our few innate instincts, but with his m o u t h right at my enlarged brown nipple, his head lolled away in distaste.

T h o u g h I'd been warned that I wouldn't lactate on demand like a cafeteria milk dispenser, I kept trying; he kept resisting; he liked the other nipple no better. And all the while I was waiting.

My breath shallow, I was waiting. And I kept waiting. *But everybody says* —, I thought. And then, distinctly: *Beware of ivhat "everybody says."*

Franklin, I felt—absent. I kept scrabbling around in myself for this n e w *indescribable* emotion, like stirring a crowded silverware drawer for the potato peeler, but no matter h o w I ratded around, no matter what I moved out of the way, it wasn't there.The potato peeler is *always* in the drawer after all. It's under the spatula, it's slipped into the fold of the food-processor guarantee—

"He's beautiful," I mumbled; I had reached for a line from TV

" C a n I?" you asked shyly.

I offered the baby up. Whereas n e w b o r n Kevin had squirmed miserably on my breast, he rested an arm around your neck, as if having found his real protector. W h e n I looked at your face, eyes closed, cheek pressed against our infant son, I recognized, if this

does not sound too flippant: There's the potato peeler. It seemed so unfair. You were clearly choked up, filled to the back of your throat with a w o n d e r m e n t that defied expression. It was like watching you lick an ice cream cone that you refused to share.

I sat up, and you returned him reluctandy, at which point Kevin began to squall. Holding the baby, w h o still refused to suckle, I was revisited by that n o w - w h a t sensation of my tenth birthday party: Here we were, in a room, and there seemed nothing to say or do. Minutes wore on, Kevin would yowl, rest limply, and jerk irritably from time to time; I felt the first stirrings of what, appallingly, I can only call boredom.

O h , please don't. I k n o w what you'd say. I was exhausted.

I'd had a thirty-seven-hour labor and it was ridiculous to think I'd be capable of feeling anything but weary and numb. A n d it had been absurd to imagine fireworks; a baby is a baby. You'd goad me to remember that nutty little story I told you about the first time I ever went overseas for my junior year abroad at Green Bay, and I stepped onto the airstrip in Madrid to be o b -

scurely disheartened that Spain, too, had trees. *Of course Spain has trees!* you jeered. I was embarrassed; of course I knew, in a way, it had trees, but with the sky and the ground and the people walking around—well, it just didn't seem that different. Later you referenced that anecdote to illustrate

that my expectations were always preposterously outsized; that my very ravenousness for the exotic was self-destructive, because as soon as I seized u p o n the otherworldly, it joined this world and didn't count.

Besides, you would cajole, parenthood isn't something that happens in an instant. T h e fact of a b a b y — w h e n so recently there was none—is so disconcerting that I probably just hadn't made the whole thing real to myself yet. I was dazed. That's it, I was dazed. I wasn't heartless or defective. Besides, sometimes w h e n you're watching yourself too hard, scrutinizing your o w n feelings, they flee, they elude capture. I was self-conscious, and I was trying too hard. I had worked myself up into a kind of emotional paralysis. Didn't I just observe that these spontaneous

outpourings of high passion are matters of faith? So my belief had flickered; I had allowed the *underfear* temporarily to get the best of me. I just needed to relax and let nature take its course. A n d for God's sake, to get some rest. I k n o w you'd say all these things, because I said t h e m to myself. A n d they didn't make a dent—in my sense that the whole thing was going w r o n g from the start, that I was not following the program, that I had dismally failed us and our n e w b o r n baby. That I was, frankly, a freak.

While they stitched up the tearing, you offered to take Kevin again, and I k n e w I should protest. I didn't. At being relieved of him, my gratitude was soul-destroying. If you want to k n o w the truth, I was angry. I was frightened, I was ashamed of myself, but I also felt cheated. I wanted my surprise party. I thought, if a w o m a n can't rely on herself to rise to an occasion like this, then she can't count on anything; from this point onward the world was on its ear. Prostrate, with my legs agape, I made a vow: that while I might have learned to expose my "private" parts for all the world to see, I would never reveal to anyone on earth that childbirth had left me unmoved. You had your unspeakable—

"Never, ever tell me that you regret our o w n kid"; n o w I had mine. Reminiscing in company about this m o m e n t later, I would reach for that word, *indescribable.* Brian was a splendid father. I would borrow my good friend's tenderness for the day.

D E C E M B E R 1 8 , 2 0 0 0

Dear Franklin,

Tonight was our office Christmas party, which isn't easy to pull off with six people fresh from one another's throats. We have httle in c o m m o n , but in general I am glad for their companionship—not so m u c h for heart-to-hearts over a sandwich as for quotidian exchanges about package deals in the Bahamas. (I'm sometimes so grateful for the busywork of flights to b o o k that I could weep.) Likewise, the simple adjacency of w a r m bodies supphes the deepest of animal comfort.

T h e manager was kind to take me into her employ. *Thursday* having w o u n d e d so many people in this area,Wanda did w o r r y at first that folks might start to avoid her premises just to keep from thinking about it. Yet to be fair to our neighbors, it is often an exceptionally heartfelt-sounding season's greetings that tips me off that a customer recognizes w h o I am. It's the staff w h o m I've disappointed. T h e y must have hoped that rubbing up against a celebrity of sorts would confer distinction on themselves and that I would furnish stirringly disturbing stories for my coworkers to dine out on. But the association is too tangential, and I doubt their friends are impressed. Most of my tales are ordinary. There is only one story they want to hear, really, and that one they k n e w backward and forward before I came on board.

A wide-hipped divorcee with a braying laugh, Wanda herself may have h o p e d that we would b e c o m e fast friends. By the end of our first lunch, she had confided that her ex-husband got an erection watching her pee, that she had just had a h e m o r r h o i d

"tied off," and that, until a near-miss with a Saks security guard at thirty-six, she'd been a compulsive shoplifter. I returned with the disclosure that after six months in my toy duplex I had finally gotten myself to buy curtains. You can see h o w she might have been a little put out that I'd got Manhattan while she got beads.

So tonight Wanda cornered me by the fax machine. She didn't want to pry, but had I sought out "help"? I k n e w what she meant, of course.The entire student body of Gladstone High School was offered free counseling by the school board, and even some of this year's intake, n o t even enrolled in 1999, has claimed to be traumatized and plunged to the couch. I didn't want to seem hostile and so say honestly that I couldn't see h o w the mere iteration of my troubles to a stranger w o u l d lessen t h e m one iota, and that surely counseling was the logical refuge of those whose problems were ephemeral fancies and not matters of historical fact. So I demurred that my experience with the mental health profession had been rather sour, kindly omitting that the failures of my son's psychiatric care had made headlines coast to coast. Moreover, it didn't seem wise to confide that thus far I had f o u n d my only "help" in writing to you, Franklin.

For s o m e h o w I feel certain that these letters are not on the list of prescribed therapies, since you are at the very heart of what I need to "get past" so that I might experience "closure." A n d what a terrible prospect is that.

Even back in 1983, I was bewildered w h y a standardized psychiatric label like *postnatal depression* was supposed to be consoling. O u r compatriots seem to put m u c h stock in slapping a tag on their ailments. Presumably a complaint c o m m o n enough to have a name implies that you are not alone and dangles options like Internet chat rooms and community support groups for rhapsodic communal bellyaching.This compulsion to bandwagon has even infiltrated American small talk. I can't remember the last

time anyone told me that he " t o o k a long time to wake up."

Instead I ' m informed that he's *not a morning person.* All those fellow travelers w h o require killer cups of coffee on waking must provide one's disinclination to hop out of bed for a ten-mile run some extra clout.

I might have achieved a renewed appreciation for my o w n normative propensities, including a not unreasonable expectation that w h e n bearing a child I will actually feel something, even something nice. But I hadn't changed that much. I'd never f o u n d solace in being just like everybody else. A n d t h o u g h Dr.

Rhinestein offered up *postnatal depression* like a present, as if simply being told that you are unhappy is supposed to cheer you up, I did not pay professionals to be plied with the obvious, with the merely descriptive. T h e t e r m was less diagnostic than tautological: I was depressed after Kevin's birth because I was depressed after Kevin's birth. Thanks.

Yet she also suggested that because Kevin's disinterest in my breast had persisted, I might be suffering feelings of rejection.

I colored. It embarrassed me that I might take the opaque predilections of such a tiny, half-formed creature to heart.

Of course she was right.At first I thought I was doing something wrong, not guiding his m o u t h . But no; I would place the nipple between his lips, where else could it go? He had sucked a time or two, but turned away, the bluish milk running down his chin. He'd cough, and, perhaps I imagined it, he even seemed to gag. W h e n I went for an emergency appointment, Dr. Rhinestein informed me flatly that "sometimes this happens." My lord, Franklin, what you discover *sometimes happens* w h e n you become a parent! I was distraught. In her office, I was surrounded by leaflets about building your baby's i m m u n e system. A n d I tried everything. I didn't drink. I eliminated dairy products. At tremendous sacrifice, I gave up onions, garlic, and chilies. I eliminated meat and fish. I installed a gluten-free regime, which left me with little more than a bowl of rice and an undressed salad.

In the end I was starving, while Kevin continued to feed in

his lackluster way on a bottle of microwaved formula that he would only accept from you. He wouldn't even take my milk from a bottle, writhing from it without a sip. He could smell it. He could smell me. Yet he didn't test positive for an allergy, at least in the medical sense. Meanwhile, my once diminutive breasts were taut, sore, and leaking. Rhinestein was adamant that I not let my milk dry up, since occasionally this aversion—that was the word she used, Franklin, *aversion*—would abate. It was so awkward and painful that I never did quite get the hang of the expressing pump, though it was sweet of you to go out and buy that hospital-grade Medela. I'm afraid I came to hate it, a chill plastic substitute for a warm suckling infant. I was aching to give him the very milk of human kindness, and he did not want it, or he did not want it from me.

I shouldn't have taken it personally, but h o w could I not?

It wasn't mother's milk he didn't want, it was Mother. In fact, I became convinced that our little bundle o f j o y had found me out.

Infants have great intuition, because intuition's about all they've got. I felt certain that he could detect a telltale stiffening in my arms w h e n I picked him up. I was confident that he could infer from a subtly exasperated quality in my voice w h e n I burbled and cooed that burbling and cooing did not come naturally to me and that his precocious ear could isolate in that endless stream of placating blather an insidious, compulsive sarcasm. Moreover, since I had read—sorry, you had read—that it was important to smile at infants to try to elicit a smile in response, I smiled and smiled, I smiled until my face hurt, but w h e n my face did hurt I was sure he could tell. Every time I forced myself to smile, he clearly knew that I didn't feel like smiling, because he never smiled back. He hadn't seen many smiles in his lifetime but he had seen yours, enough to recognize that in comparison there was something wrong with Mother's. It curled up falsely; it evaporated with revelatory rapidity w h e n I turned from his crib.

Is that where Kevin got it? In prison, that marionette smile, as if pulled up by strings.

I k n o w you doubt me on this, but I did try very hard to f o r m a passionate attachment to my son. But I had never experienced my feeling for you, for example, as an exercise that I was obliged to rehearse like scales on the piano. T h e harder I *tried*, the more aware I became that my very effort was an abomination. Surely all this tenderness that in the end I simply aped should have come knocking at the door uninvited. H e n c e it was not just Kevin w h o depressed me, or the fact that your o w n affections were increasingly diverted; I depressed me. I was guilty of emotional malfeasance.

B u t Kevin depressed me as well, and I do mean *Kevin* and not *the baby.* From the very beginning that child was particular to me, whereas you often asked *How's the kid?* or *How's my boy?*

or *Where's the baby?* To me he was never "the baby." He was a singular, unusually cunning individual w h o had arrived to stay with us and just happened to be very small. For you he was " o u r son"—or, once you started to give up on me, "my son." There was a persistently generic character to your adoration that I ' m certain he sensed.

Before you get your back up, I don't mean that as a criticism.

It must be this overarching commitment to what is really an abstraction, to one's children right or wrong, that can be even more fierce than the commitment to t h e m as explicit, difficult people, and that can consequently keep you devoted to t h e m w h e n as individuals they disappoint. On my part it was this broad covenant with children-in-theory that I may have failed to make and to which I was unable to resort w h e n Kevin finally tested my maternal ties to a perfect mathematical limit on *Thursday.*

I didn't vote for parties, but for candidates. My opinions were as ecumenical as my larder, then still chock full of salsa verde from Mexico City,

anchovies from Barcelona, lime leaves from Bangkok. I had no problem with abortion but abhorred capital punishment, w h i c h I suppose meant that I embraced the sanctity of life only in grown-ups. My environmental habits were capricious; I'd place a brick in our toilet tank, but after submitting to dozens of spit-in-the-air showers with derisory European water pressure, I would bask under a deluge of scalding water for half an hour. My closet wafted with Indian saris, Ghanaian wraparounds, and Vietnamese *au dais.* My vocabulary was peppered with imports—*gemutlich, scusa, hugge, mzungu.* I so mixed and matched the planet that you sometimes worried I had no commitments to anything or anywhere, though you were wrong; my c o m m i t -

ments were simply far-flung and obscenely specific.

By the same token, I could not love *a* child; I would have to love this one. I was connected to the world by a multitude of threads, you by a few sturdy guide ropes. It was the same with patriotism: You loved the *idea* of the U n i t e d States so m u c h more powerfully than the country itself, and it was thanks to your embrace of the American aspiration that you could overlook the fact that your fellow Yankee parents were lining up overnight outside FAO Schwartz with thermoses of chowder to buy a limited release of Nintendo. In the particular dwells the tawdry. In the conceptual dwells the grand, the transcendent, the everlasting.

Earthly countries and single malignant little boys can go to hell; the idea of countries and the idea of sons t r i u m p h for eternity.

Although neither of us ever went to church, I came to conclude that you were a naturally religious person.

In the end, mastitis put an end to my desperate search for whatever foodstuff was putting Kevin off my milk. Poor nutrition may have made me susceptible. That and fumbling to get Kevin to take the breast, which could have lacerated the nipples enough to transmit infection from his m o u t h . Inimical to my sustenance, he could still introduce me to corruption, as if already at year zero the more worldly party of our pair.

Since the first sign of mastitis is fatigue, it's little w o n d e r that the early symptoms went unobserved. He'd w o r n me out for weeks. I bet you still don't believe me about his fits of pique, t h o u g h a rage that lasts for six to eight hours seems less a fit than a natural state, from which the tranquil respites you witnessed were

bizarre departures. O u r son had *fits of peace.* And this may sound completely mad, but the consistency with which Kevin shrieked with precocious force of will the w h o l e time he and I were alone, and then with the abruptness of switching off a heavy-metal radio station desisted the m o m e n t you came home—well, it seemed deliberate. T h e silence still ringing for me, you'd bend over our slumbering angel w h o unbeknownst to you was just beginning to sleep off his Olympian exertions of the day. T h o u g h I'd never have wished on you my o w n pulsing headaches, I couldn't bear the subtle distrust that was building between us w h e n your experience of our son did not square with mine. I have sometimes entertained the retroactive delusion that even in his crib Kevin was learning to divide and conquer, scheming to present such contrasting temperaments that we were b o u n d to be set at odds. Kevin's features were unusually sharp for a baby, while my o w n still displayed that rounded Mario Thomas credulity, as if he had leeched my very shrewdness in utero.

Childless, I'd perceived baby crying as a pretty undifferentiated affair. It was loud; it was n o t so loud. B u t in m o t h e r h o o d I developed an ear. There's the wail of inarticulate need, w h a t is effectively a child's first groping after language, for sounds that m e a n *wet* o r *f o o d* or *pin!* There's the shriek of terror—that no one is here and that there may never be anyone here again. There's that lassitudinous *wah-wah,* n o t unlike the call to mosque in the Middle East or improvisational song; this is creative crying, f u n crying, f r o m babies w h o , while not especially unhappy, have failed to register that we like to constrain weeping to conditions of distress. Perhaps saddest of all is the muted, habitual m e w l of a baby w h o may be perfectly miserable but w h o , w h e t h e r through neglect or prescience,

no longer anticipates reprieve—w h o in infancy has already b e c o m e reconciled to the idea that to live is to suffer.

O h , I imagine there are as many reasons that n e w b o r n babies cry as that grown ones do, but Kevin practiced n o n e of these standard lachrymal modes. Sure, after you got h o m e he'd

sometimes fuss a little like a *normal* baby that he wanted feeding or changing, and you'd take care of it and he'd stop; and then you'd look at me like, see? and I'd want to slug you.

W i t h me, once you left, Kevin was not to be bought off with anything so petty and transitory as milk or dry diapers. If fear of abandonment contributed to a decibel level that rivaled an industrial buzz saw, his loneliness displayed an awesome existential purity; it wasn't about to be allayed by the hover of that haggard cow with her nauseating waft of white fluid. A n d I discerned no plaintive cry of appeal, no keen of despair, no gurgle of nameless dread. Rather, he hurled his voice like a weapon, howls smashing the walls of our loft like a baseball bat bashing a bus shelter. In concert, his fists sparred with the mobile over his crib, he kick-boxed his blanket, and there were times I stepped back after patting and stroking and changing and marveled at the sheer athleticism of the performance. It was unmistakable: Driving this remarkable combustion engine was the distilled and infinitely renewable fuel of *outrage.*

About what? you might well ask.

He was dry, he was fed, he had slept. I would have tried blanket on, blanket off; he was neither hot nor cold. He'd been burped, and I have a gut instinct that he didn't have colic; Kevin's was not a cry of pain but of wrath. He had toys dangling overhead, rubber blocks in his bed. His m o t h e r had taken six months off from work to spend every day by his side, and I picked him up so often that my arms ached; you could not say he lacked for attention.

As the papers would be so fond of observing sixteen years later, Kevin had everything.

I have theorized that you can locate most people on a spectrum of the crudest sort and that it may be their position on this scale with which their every other attribute correlates: exactly h o w m u c h they like being here, just being alive. I think Kevin hated it. I think Kevin was off the scale, he hated being here so much.

He may even have retained some trace spiritual m e m o r y from before conception, and glorious nullity was far more what he

missed than my womb. Kevin seemed incensed that no one had ever consulted him about turning up in a crib with time going on and on, w h e n nothing whatsoever interested him in that crib.

He was the least curious little boy I've ever encountered, with a few exceptions to that rule that I shudder to contemplate.

O n e afternoon I started to feel draggier than usual, at times a bit light-headed. For days I'd been unable to keep warm, and it was late May; outside, N e w Yorkers were in shorts. Kevin had pulled off a virtuosic recital. Huddled on the couch in a blanket, I reflected crankily on the fact that you'd stacked up m o r e w o r k than ever. Fair enough, as a freelancer you didn't want your l o n g - t e r m clients to find an alternative scout, whereas my o w n company could be trusted to underlings and wouldn't just go away. B u t s o m e h o w this meant that I was stuck all day w i t h hell in a handbasket while you tooled merrily off in your baby-blue pickup to window-shop for fields with the right-colored cows.

I suspected that if our situation were reversed—you headed a thriving company while I was a lone freelance location scout—

Eva would be expected to drop the scouting altogether like a hot brick.

W h e n the elevator clanked and shuddered, I was just noticing that a small patch under my right breast had turned bright red, tender, and strangely stiff, mirroring the m u c h larger such patch on the left. You opened the lattice gate and went straight to the crib. I was glad you were turning into such an attentive father, but of the two other inhabitants of our loft it was only your wife w h o appreciated the meaning of the w o r d *hello.*

"Please don't wake him up," I whispered. "He's only been d o w n twenty minutes and he's outdone himself today. I doubt he ever goes to sleep. He passes out."

"Well, has he been fed?" Deaf to my imprecations, you had laid h i m on your shoulder and were poking at his conked-out face.

He looked deceptively content. Dreams of oblivion, perhaps.

"Yes, Franklin," I said with immoderate control. "After *four*

or jive hours of listening to little Kevin bring the house down, I thought of that. — W h y are you using the stove?"

"Microwaving kills nutrients." Over lunch at McDonald's, you read baby books.

"It isn't so simple as figuring out what he wants and can't ask for. Most of the time he has no idea what he wants." I caught it: Your eyes flicked toward the ceiling like, oh-brother-not-this-again." *You think I'm exaggerating."*

"I didn't say that."

"You think he's 'crabby.' He's 'fussy' sometimes, because he's h u n g r y — "

"Listen, Eva, I ' m sure he gets a litde ill-tempered—"

"See? A *little ill-tempered*." I waddled to the kitchen in my blanket."You don't believe me!" I had broken out in a cold sweat and must either have been flushed or pale. Walking hurt the soles of my feet and sent pains shivering d o w n my left arm.

"I believe you're being straight up about your *perception* of h o w hard it is. B u t what did you expect, a walk in the park?"

" N o t a carefree stroll, but this is like being *mugged* in the park!"

"Look, he's my son, too. I see him, too, every day. Sometimes he cries a little. So what. I'd worry if he didn't."

Apparently my testimony was tainted. I would have to bring in other witnesses. "You realize that John, downstairs, is threatening to move out?"

"John's a fag, and they don't like babies. This whole country's anti-child, I ' m only just starting to notice.'The severity wasn't like you, except that for once you were talking about the real country and not the star-spangledValhalla in your head. "See?" Kevin had roused on your shoulder, then took the bottle peaceably without opening his eyes."I'm sorry, but most of the time he seems pretty good-natured to me."

"He's not *good-natured* right now, he's exhausted! A n d so am I. I k n o w I ' m run down, but I don't feel right. Dizzy. Chills. I w o n d e r if I ' m running a fever."

"Well, that's a shame," you said formally. "Get some rest, then.

I'll make dinner."

I stared. This coldness was so unlike you! I was supposed to belittle my own infirmities, you to make a to-do over them.

Forcing you to go through the motions of your old solicitation, I took the bottle and plastered your hand to my forehead.

"Touch warm," you said, withdrawing the hand right away.

I'm afraid that I couldn't stand up anymore, and my skin hurt wherever the blanket touched it. So I staggered back to the couch, as if reeling from my revelation: You were angry at me. Fatherhood hadn't disappointed you; I had. You thought you'd married a trooper. Instead your wife was proving a whiner, the very peevish sort she decried amid America's malcontented overfed, for w h o m a commonplace travail like missing a FedEx delivery three times in a row and having to go to the depot constitutes intolerable

"stress," the stuff of cosdy therapies and pharmaceutical redress.

Even for Kevin's refusal to take my breast you held me dimly accountable. I had denied you the maternal tableau, that luscious Sunday-morning loll amid the sheets with buttered toast: son suckling, wife aglow, breasts spilling their bounty over the pillow, until you are forced out of bed for the camera.

Here I thought that I'd brilliandy disguised my true feelings about m o t h e r h o o d thus far, to the point of dereliction; so m u c h lying in marriage is merely a matter of keeping quiet. I had refrained from throwing that self-evident diagnosis of *postnatal depression* d o w n on our coffee table like a trophy but had kept this formal accreditation to myself. Meanwhile, I'd brought h o m e loads of editing work but had only got through a few pages; I was eating badly and sleeping badly and showering at most every three days; I saw no one and rarely got out because Kevin's rages, in public, were not socially acceptable; and daily, I faced a purple churn of insatiable fury while rehearsing to myself with dull incomprehension, *I'm supposed to love this.*

"If you're having trouble coping, we don't lack for resources."

You towered over my couch with your son, like one of those

mighty peasant icons of dedication to family and motherland in Soviet murals. "We could hire a girl."

" O h , I forgot to tell you," I mumbled."I had a conference call with the office. We're researching demand for an African edition.

AFRIWAP. T h o u g h t it had a ring."

"I did not mean," you stooped, your voice deep and h o t in my ear, "that someone else could raise our son while you go p y t h o n -

hunting in the Belgian Congo."

"Zaire," I said.

"We're in this together, Eva."

" T h e n *why do you always take his side?"*

"He's only seven weeks old! He's not big enough to have a side!"

I wrenched myself to a stand. You may have mistaken me for tearfiil, but my eyes were watering of their o w n accord. W h e n I lumbered into the bathroom, it was less to get the thermometer than to underscore the fact that you had failed to fetch it for me.

W h e n I returned with the tube poking from my m o u t h , was I imagining it, or were your eyes once more rolling toward the ceiling?

I scrutinized the mercury under a lamp. " H e r e — y o u read it.

Everything's a bit blurry."

Absently you held the tube to the light. "Eva, you screwed it up.You must have put it near the bulb or something."You shook the mercury down, poked the end in my m o u t h , and left to change Kevin's diaper.

I shuffled to the changing table and made my offering. You checked the reading and stabbed me with a black glance. "It's not funny, Eva."

" W h a t are you talking about?"This time they were tears.

"Heating the thermometer. It's a shitty joke."

" I ' m not heating the thermometer. I just put the bulb under m y t o n g u e — "

"Crap, Eva, it reads practically 104°."

" O h . "

— 110 —

You looked at me. You looked at Kevin, for once torn between loyalties. Hastily you scooped him from the table, then bedded him with such perfunctoriness that he forgot his strict theatrical schedule and cranked up his daytime I-hate-the-whole-world shriek. With that manliness I'd always adored, you ignored him.

" I ' m so sorry!" In one swoop you lifted me off the floor and swept me back to the couch. "You're really sick.We've got to call Rhinestein, get you to a hospital—"

I was sleepy, fading. But I do remember thinking that it had taken too much. Wondering if I would have a cool cloth on my forehead, ice water and three aspirin at my side, and Dr. Rhinestein on the telephone if the thermometer had read only 101°.

— 111 —

D E C E M B E R 1 3 , 2 0 0 0

Dear Franklin,

I ' m a bit rattled, since the p h o n e just rang and I have no idea h o w this Jack Marlin person got my unlisted number. He claimed to be a documentary maker from N B C . I suppose the droll working title of his project, "Extracurricular Activities," sounds authentic enough, and at least he was quick to distance himself from "Anguish at Gladstone High," that hasty Fox show that Giles informed me was mostly on-camera weeping and prayer services. Still I asked Marlin w h y he imagined that I would want to participate in one more sensationalist postmortem of the day my life as I understood it came to an end, and he said I might want to tell "my side of the story."

" W h a t side would that be?" I was on record as assuming the opposition w h e n Kevin was seven weeks old.

"For example, wasn't your son the victim of sexual abuse?"

Marlin plied.

"A *victim*? Are we talking about the same boy?"

" W h a t about this Prozac business?" T h e sympathetic p u r r could only have been put on. " T h a t was his defense at the trial, and it was pretty well supported."

" T h a t was his lawyer's idea," I said faintly.

"Just generally—maybe you think Kevin was misunderstood?"

I ' m sorry Franklin, I k n o w I should have hung up, but I speak to so few people outside the office...What did I say? Something

like,"I'm afraid I understand my son all too well." And I said,"For that matter, Kevin must be one of the best-understood young m e n in the country. Actions speak louder than words, don't they?

Seems to me he got across his personal *worldview* better than most.

Seems to me that you should be interviewing children w h o are a great deal less accomplished at self-expression."

" W h a t do you think he was trying to say?" asked Marlin, excited at having snagged a real live specimen of what has b e c o m e a remote parental elite, whose members are strangely uneager for their fifteen minutes on TV.

I ' m sure the call was recorded, and I should have watched my tongue. Instead I blurted, "Whatever his *message* was, Mr.

Marlin, it was clearly disagreeable. W h y on earth would you like to provide him one more f o r u m for propounding it?"

W h e n my caller launched into some nonsense about insight into disturbed boys being vital so that next time "we can see it coming," I cut him off.

"I saw it coming for nearly sixteen years, Mr. Marlin," I snapped. "A fat lot of good that did." A n d I h u n g up.

I k n o w he was only doing his job, but I don't like his job.

I ' m sick of newshounds snuffling at my door like dogs that smell meat. I am tired of being made a meal of.

I was gratified w h e n Dr. Rhinestein, having lectured that it was practically unheard of, was forced to concede that I had indeed contracted mastitis in both breasts.Those five days in Beth Israel on an antibiotic drip were painful, but I was coming to treasure physical pain as a f o r m of suffering I understood, in contrast to the baffling despair of n e w motherhood. T h e relief of simple quiet was immense.

Still in the grip of your breadwinning fever and perhaps—admit it—reluctant to put our son's "good-natured" temperament to the test, you took this opportunity to hire a nanny. Or should I say two nannies, since by the time I came h o m e the first one had quit.

N o t that you were volunteering this information. In the pickup as you were driving me h o m e you simply began nattering about the marvelous Siobhan, and I had to stop you. "I thought her name was Carlotta."

" O h , *her.* You know, a lot of these girls are immigrants w h o plan to go A W O L w h e n their visa turns into a pumpkin. T h e y don't really care about kids."

W h e n e v e r the pickup hit a bump, my breasts flamed. I wasn't looking forward to the excruciating process of expressing milk on arrival, which I'd been dictated to do religiously every four hours for the sake of the mastitis, even if only to p o u r the milk d o w n the drain. "I take it Carlotta didn't work out."

"I told her up front he was a *baby.* A pooping, farting, b u r p i n g — "

"—Screaming—"

"—Baby. She seemed to have expected, like, a self-cleaning oven or something."

"So you sacked her."

" N o t exactly. But Siobhan is a saint. From N o r t h e r n Ireland, of all places. Maybe folks used to being b o m b e d and shit can keep a little w h i m p e r i n g in perspective."

"You mean Carlotta quit. After only a few days. Because Kevin was—what's the term of art? *Cranky."*

"After one day, if you can believe it. And w h e n I call at lunchtime to make sure everything's all right, she has the gall to insist I cut my workday short and relieve her of my son. I was tempted not to pay her a dime, but I didn't want us blacklisted with her agency." (Prophetic. We were blacklisted by her agency two years later.)

Siobhan *was* a saint. A bit homely at first glance, with unruly black curls and that deathly white Irish skin, she had one of those doll-baby bodies that didn't narrow at the joints, but merely crimped a bit; though she was slim enough, the columnar limbs and waistless torso gave the impression of thickness. Yet I grew to regard her as prettier with time because she was so good-hearted.

True, I was apprehensive w h e n she mentioned at our introduction that she was a m e m b e r of that Alpha Course Christian sect. I conceived of such people as mindless fanatics and dreaded being subjected to daily testimonials. A prejudice, and one Siobhan did not substantiate; she rarely raised the subject again. Maybe this offbeat religious route was her bid to opt out of the Catholic-Protestant folderol back in C o u n t y Antrim, of which she never spoke, and from which she had further insulated herself with the Atlantic O c e a n as if for good measure.

You teased me that I took such a shine to Siobhan just because she was a *Wing and a Prayer* fan, for she'd used AWAP

w h e n traveling the Continent. Unsure w h a t G o d w o u l d "call"

her to do, she said she couldn't imagine a more delightful occupation than professional globetrotting, stirring my nostalgia for a life already growing distant. She ignited the same pride that I h o p e d Kevin would some day kindle, w h e n he got old e n o u g h to appreciate his parents' accomplishments. I'd already indulged the o d d fantasy whereby Kevin w o u l d pore over my old photographs, asking breathlessly, *Where's this? What's that?*

You've been to AFRICA? Wow! But Siobhan s admiration proved cruelly misleading. Kevin did *pour over* a box of my photographs o n c e — w i t h kerosene.

After a second round of antibiotics, the mastitis cleared up.

R e s i g n e d that Kevin was on formula for keeps, I allowed my breasts to engorge and dry up, and w i t h Siobhan holding d o w n the fort was at length able to return to AWAP that fall. W h a t a relief, to dress well, to move briskly, to speak in low, adult tones, to tell someone what to do and to have t h e m do it. W h i l e I t o o k fresh relish in what had previously g r o w n workaday, I also chided myself for having imputed to a tiny bundle of confusion such malign motives as an intent to drive a wedge b e t w e e n you and me. I'd b e e n unwell. It had b e e n harder to adapt to o u r n e w life than I'd expected. Recuperating some of my old energy and discovering with pleasure that I had agitated myself back d o w n to my f o r m e r figure, I assumed that the worst was over and made a mental note that the next time o n e of my friends bore a first child I would fall all over myself to sympathize.

O f t e n I'd invite Siobhan to linger with me for a cup of coffee w h e n I came home, and the enjoyment I took in conversing with a w o m a n roughly half my age may have been less the delight of leaping generations than the more standard one of talking to anybody. I was confiding in Siobhan because I was not confiding in my husband.

"You must have wanted Kevin something fierce," said Siobhan on one such occasion. "Seeing the sights, meeting amazing people—and paid for the pleasure, if you can credit it! I can't imagine giving that up."

"I haven't given it up," I said. "After a year or so, I'll resume business as usual."

Siobhan stirred her coffee. "Is that w h a t Franklin expects?"

"It's what he ought to expect."

"But he mentioned, like," she was n o t comfortable with tattling, "that your running off for months at a go, like—that it was over."

"For a while there, I was a little b u r n e d out. Always running out of fresh underwear; all those French train strikes. It's possible I gave the wrong impression."

" O h , aye," she said sorrowfully. I doubt that she was trying to make trouble, though she saw it coming. " H e must have been lonely, w h e n you'd go away. A n d n o w if you take your trips again, he'd be the only one to mind wee Kevin w h e n I ' m not here. Of course, in America, don't some da's stay home, and the ma's go to work?"

"There are Americans and Americans. Franklin's not the type."

"But you run a whole company. Sure you could afford..."

" O n l y in the financial sense. It's hard enough w h e n a man's wife is profded in *Fortune* magazine and he's only location-scouted the advertisement on the facing page."

"Franklin said you used to be on the road five months a year.

"Obviously," I said heavily, "I'll have to cut back."

"You know, you may find that Kevin's a wee bit tricky, like.

He's a—an uneasy baby. Sometimes they grow out of it." She hazarded starkly, "Sometimes they don't."

You thought that Siobhan was devoted to o u r son, but I read her loyalty as more to you and me. She rarely spoke of Kevin in other than a logistical sense. A new set of bottles had been sterilized; our disposable "nappies" were running low. For such a passionate girl this mechanical approach seemed unlike her. (Though she did observe once, " H e has like, beady eyes, so he does!" She laughed nervously and qualified,"I m e a n — intense.""Yes, they're unnerving, aren't they," I rejoined, as neutrally as I k n e w how.) But she adored the two of us. She was entranced with the freedom of our dual self-employment, and, despite the evangelical romance with "family values," was clearly disconcerted that we would willfully impair this giddy liberty with the ball and chain of an infant. And maybe we

gave her hope for her future. We were middle-aged, but we listened to T h e Cars and Joe Jackson; if she didn't approve of bad language, she may still have been broadly heartened that a codger nearing forty could decry a dubious baby manual as *horseshit.* In turn, we paid her well and accommodated her church obligations. I gave her the odd present, like a silk scarf from Thailand, which she gushed over so m u c h that I was embarrassed. She thought you devastatingly handsome, admiring the sturdiness of your figure and the disarming flop of your flaxen hair. I wonder if she didn't "fancy" you a tad.

Having every reason to assume that Siobhan was contented in our employ, I was puzzled to note as the months advanced that she began to look curiously drawn. I k n o w the Irish don't age well, but even for her thin-skinned race she was m u c h too young to develop those hard worry lines across her forehead. She could be testy w h e n I returned from the office, snapping w h e n I had simply expressed surprise that we were low again on baby food,

" O c h , it doesn't all go in his m o u t h , y o u know!" She immediately

apologized, and grew fleetingly tearful but wouldn't explain. She became more difficult to entice into a debriefing cup of coffee, as if anxious to be quit of our loft, and I was nonplussed by her reaction w h e n I proposed that she move in. You remember that I offered to wall off that ill-used catchall corner, and to install a separate bath. W h a t I had in mind would have been far more capacious than the cubbyhole she shared in the East Village with a loose, boozing, godless waitress she didn't m u c h like. I wouldn't have cut her salary, either, so she'd have saved buckets on rent.Yet at the prospect of becoming a live-in nanny, she recoiled. W h e n she protested that she could never break her lease on that Avenue C hovel, it sounded like, well, *horseshit.*

And then she started calling in sick. Just once or twice a m o n t h at first, but at length she was p h o n i n g in with a sore throat or an upset stomach

at least once a week. She looked wretched enough; she couldn't have been eating well, because those doll-baby curves had given way to a stick-figure frailty, and w h e n the Irish pale, they look exhumed. So I was hesitant to accuse her of faking. Deferentially I inquired if she had boyfriend problems, if there was trouble with her family in Carickfergus, or if she was pining for N o r t h e r n Ireland. "Pining for *Northern Ireland*," she repeated wryly. "You're having me on." T h a t m o m e n t of h u m o r served to highlight that her jokes had grown rare.

These impromptu vacations of hers put me to great

inconvenience, since according to the now-established logic of your tenuous freelance employment versus my fatuous security as C E O , I was the one to stay home. N o t only would I have to reschedule meetings or conduct t h e m awkwardly in conference calls, but a whole extra day spent with our precious little ward tipped a precarious equilibrium in me; by nightfall on a day I had not been girded for Kevin's unrelenting horror at his o w n existence, I was, as our nanny would say, *mental.* It was through the insufferable addition of that extra day a week that Siobhan and I came, tacitly at first, to understand each other.

Clearly, God's children are meant to savor His glorious gifts

without petulance, for Siobhan's uncanny forbearance could only have issued from catechism. No a m o u n t of wheedling would elicit whatever was driving her abed every Friday. So if only to give her permission, I complained myself.

"I have no regrets about my travels," I began one early evening as she prepared to go, "but it's a shame I met Franklin so late. Four years just the two of us wasn't nearly enough time to get tired of him! I think it must be nice if you meet your partner in your twenties, with long enough as a childless couple to, I don't know, get a little bored even. T h e n in your thirties you're ready for a change, and a baby is welcome."

Siobhan looked at me sharply, and though I expected censure in her gaze I caught only a sudden alertness. " O f course, you don't mean Kevin isn't welcome."

I k n e w the m o m e n t mandated hurried reassurances, but I couldn't furnish them. This would happen to me sporadically in the coming years: I would do and say what I was supposed to week u p o n week without fail until abruptly I hit a wall. I would open my m o u t h and *That's a really pretty drawing, Kevin* or *If we tear the flowers out of the ground they'll die, and you don't want them to die, do you?* or *Yes, we're so awfully proud of our son, Mr. Cartland* would simply not come out.

"Siobhan," I said reluctantly. "I've been a little disappointed."

"I k n o w I've been poorly, Eva—"

" N o t in you." I considered that she may have understood me perfectly well and had misinterpreted me on purpose. I shouldn't have burdened this young girl with my secrets, but I felt strangely impelled. "All the bawling and the nasty plastic toys...I'm not sure quite what I had in mind, but it wasn't this."

"Sure you might have a touch of p o s t p a r t u m — "

"Whatever you call it, I don't feel joyful. A n d Kevin doesn't seem joyful either."

"He's a baby!"

"He's over a year and a half.You k n o w h o w people are always cooing, *He's such a happy child!* Well, in that instance there are

unhappy children. And nothing I do makes the slightest bit of difference."

She kept fiddling with her daypack, nestling the last of her few possessions into its cavity with undue concentration. She always brought a book to read for Kevin's naps, and I finally noticed that she'd been stuffing the exact same volume in that daypack for months. I'd have understood if it was a Bible, but it was only an inspirational text—slim, the cover now badly stained—and she had once described herself as an avid reader.

"Siobhan, I'm useless with babies. I've never had much rapport with small children, but I'd hoped.. .Well, that motherhood would reveal another side of myself." I met one of her darting glances.

"It hasn't."

She squirmed. "Ever talk to Franklin, about how you're feeling?"

I laughed with one *ha.* "Then we'd have to *do* something about it. Like what?"

"Don't you figure the first couple of years is the tough bit?

That it gets easier?"

I licked my hps. "I realize this doesn't sound very nice. But I keep waiting for the emotional payoff."

"But only by giving do you get anything back."

She shamed me, but then I thought about it. "I give him my every weekend, my every evening. I've even given him my husband, w h o has no interest in talking about anything but our son, or in doing anything together besides wheeling a stroller up and down the Battery Park promenade. In return, Kevin smites me with the evil eye, and can't bear for me to hold him. Can't bear much of anything, as far as I can tell."

This kind of talk was making Siobhan edgy; it was domestic heresy. But something seemed to cave in her, and she couldn't keep up the cheerleading. So instead of forecasting what delights were in store for me once Kevin

became a little person in his own right, she said gloomily, "Aye, I know what you mean."

"Tell me, does Kevin—respond to you?"

"Respond?" T h e sardonicism was new. "You could say that."

" W h e n you're with him during the day, does he laugh?

Gurgle contentedly? *Sleep?"* I realized that I had refrained from asking her as m u c h for all these months, and that in so doing I'd been taking advantage of her ungrudging nature.

" H e pulls my hair," she said quietly.

"But all babies—they don't k n o w — "

" H e pulls it very hard indeed. He's old enough n o w and I think he knows it hurts. And Eva, that lovely silk muffler from Bangkok. It's in shreds."

Ch-plang! Ch-plang! Kevin was awake. He was banging a rattle onto that metal xylophone you came h o m e with (alas), and was not showing musical promise.

" W h e n he's alone with me," I said over the racket. "Franklin calls it *cranky—"*

" H e throws all his toys out of the playpen, and then he screams, and he will not stop screaming until they are all back, and then he throws them out again. *Flings* them."

P-p-plang-k-chang-CHANG! PLANK! P-P-P-plankpankplank-plank! There was a violent clatter, from w h i c h I construed that Kevin had kicked the instrument from between the slats of his crib.

"It's desperate!" Siobhan despaired. " H e does the same thing in his highchair, with Cheerios, porridge, cream crackers.. .With all his food on the floor like, I haven't a baldy where he gets the energy!"

"You mean," I touched her hand, "you don't k n o w where *you* get the energy."

Mwah... Mmwah... Mmmmwhawhah... He started like a lawn-mower. Siobhan and I looked each other in the eye. *Mwah-eee!*

EEEeee! EEEEEEEE! EEahEEEEEEEE! Neither of us arose from our chair.

" O f course," said Siobhan hopefully, "I guess it's different w h e n it's yours."

"Yup," I said. "Totally different."

EEahEEEEEahEEEE! EEahEEEEEahEEEE! EEahEEEEE-

ahEEEE!

"I used to want a big family," she said, turning away. " N o w I ' m n o t so sure."

"If I were you," I said, "I'd think twice."

Kevin filled the silence between us as I fought a rising panic.

I had to say something to forestall w h a t was coming next, but I couldn't think of any comment to pass that wouldn't further justify what I wished fervidly to prevent.

"Eva," she began. " I ' m knackered. I don't think Kevin likes me. I've prayed until I ' m blue—for patience, for love, for strength.

I thought G o d was testing m e — "

" W h e n Jesus said *Suffer the little children*," I said dryly, "I don't think nannying is what he had in mind."

"I hate to think I've failed Him! Or you, Eva! Still, do you think there's any chance—do you think you could use me at A W i n g and a Prayer? Those guidebooks, you said loads of them's researched by university students and that. C o u l d you—could you please, please send me to Europe, or Asia? I'd do a brilliant job, I promise!"

I sagged. "You mean you want to quit."

"You and Franklin been dead decent, you must think me terrible ungrateful. Still, w h e n you lot move to the suburbs you'd have to find someone else anyway, right? 'Cause I came over here b o u n d and determined to live in N e w York City."

"I am, too! W h o says we're moving to the burbs?"

"Franklin, of course."

"We're not moving to any suburbs," I said firmly.

She shrugged. She had already withdrawn so from our little unit that she regarded this miscommunication as none of her affair.

"Would you like more money?" I offered pathetically; my full-time residence in this country was beginning to take its toll.

" T h e pay's great, Eva. I can't do it anymore, just. Every m o r n i n g I wake u p . . . "

I k n e w exactly h o w she woke feeling. A n d I couldn't do it to

her any longer. I think I ' m a bad mother, and you always thought so, too. But deep inside me lurks the rare maternal bone. Siobhan was at her limit.Though it ran wildly counter to our interests, her earthly salvation was within my power to grant.

"We're updating NETHERWAP," I said morosely; I had an awful premonition that Siobhan s resignation would be effective right away. "Would you like that? Rating hostels in Amsterdam?

T h e rijsttafels are delicious."

Siobhan forgot herself and threw her arms around me. "Would you like for me to try and quiet him?" she offered. "Maybe his n a p p y — "

"I doubt that; it's too rational. N o , you've put in a full day.

And take the rest of the week off. You're shattered." I was already sweetening her up, to get her to stick around until we f o u n d a replacement. Fat chance.

" O n e last thing," said Siobhan, tucking my note with the name of N E T H E R W A P ' s editor into her pack."Wee'uns vary, of course.

But Kevin should really be talking by now. A few words anyway.

Maybe you should ask your doctor. Or talk to h i m more."

I promised, then saw her to the elevator, shooting a rueful glance at the crib. "You know, it *is* different w h e n it's yours.

You can't go home." Indeed, my yearning to *go home* had grown recurrent, but was most intense w h e n I was already there.

We exchanged wan smiles, and she waved behind the gate. I watched from the front w i n d o w as she ran d o w n H u d s o n Street, away from our loft and *wee Kevin* as fast as her unshapely legs could carry her.

I returned to our son's marathon and looked d o w n at his writhing dudgeon. I was not going to pick him up. No one was there to make me and

I didn't want to. I would not, as Siobhan had suggested, check his diaper, nor would I w a r m a botde of milk. I would let him cry and cry. Resting both elbows on the crib rail, I cradled my chin on intertwined fingers. Kevin was crouched on all fours in one of the positions that the N e w School c o m m e n d e d for birthing: primed for exertion. Most tots

cry with their eyes shut, but Kevin's were slit open. W h e n our gazes locked, I felt we were finally communicating. His pupils were still almost black, and I could see them fhntily register that for once Mother was not going to get in a flap about whatever might be the matter.

"Siobhan thinks I should talk to you," I said archly over the din. " W h o else is going to, since you drove her off? That's right, you screamed and puked her out the door. What's your problem, you little shit? Proud of yourself, for ruining Mummy's life?" I was careful to use the insipid falsetto the experts commend. "You've got Daddy snowed, but Mummy's got your number.You're a little shit, aren't you?"

Kevin hoisted to a stand without missing a yowl. Clutching the bars, he screamed at me from just a few inches away, and my ears hurt. So scrunched up, his face looked like an old man's, and it was screwed into the I'm-gonna-get-you expression of a convict who's already started digging a tunnel with a nail fde. On a purely zoo-keeping level, my proximity was hazardous; Siobhan hadn't been kidding about the hair.

" M u m m y was happy before widdle Kevin came awong, you know that, don't you? And now M u m m y wakes up every day and wishes she were in France. Mummy's life sucks now, doesn't Mummy's life suck? Do you know there are some days that M u m m y would rather be dead? Rather than listen to you screech for one more minute there are some days that M u m m y would j u m p off the Brooklyn Bridge—"

I turned, and blanched. I may never have seen quite that stony look on your face.

"They understand speech long before they learn to talk," you said, pushing past me to pick him up. "I don't understand how you can stand there and watch him cry."

"Franklin, ease up, I was only kidding around!" I shot a parting private glare at Kevin. It was thanks to his caterwauling that I hadn't heard the elevator gate. "I'm blowing off a httle steam, okay? Siobhan quit. Hear that? Siobhan quit."

— 125 —

"Yeah, I heard you. Too bad. We'll get someone else."

"It turns out that all along she's regarded this j o b as a m o d e r n rewrite of the B o o k of J o b — L o o k , I'll change him."

You wrenched h i m away. "You can steer clear until you get your mind right. Or j u m p off a bridge. Whichever comes first."

I trailed after you. "Say, what's this about *moving to the suburbs?*

Since w h e n ? "

"Since—I quote— *the little shit* is getting mobile.That elevator is a death trap."

"We can gate off the elevator!"

" H e needs a *yard."* Sanctimoniously, you balled the wet diaper in the pail. " W h e r e we can toss a baseball, fill a pool."

T h e awful revelation dawned that we were dealing with your childhood—an idealization of your childhood—that could prove, hke your fantasy United States, an awesome cudgel. There's no more d o o m e d a struggle than a battle with the imaginary.

"But I love N e w York!" I sounded hke a b u m p e r sticker.

"It's dirty and swimming in diseases, and a kid's i m m u n e system isn't fully developed until he's seven years old. A n d we could stand to move into a good school district."

"This city has the best private schools in the country."

" N e w York private schools are snobbish and cutthroat. Kids in this t o w n start worrying about getting into Harvard at the age of six."

" W h a t about the tiny matter that your wife doesn't want to leave this city?"

"You had twenty years to do whatever you wanted. I did, too.

Besides, you said you yearned to spend our m o n e y on something worthwhile. Now's your chance. We should buy a house. W i t h land and a tire swing."

" M y mother never made a single major decision based on what was good for me."

"Your mother has locked herself in a closet for forty years.

Your mother is insane.Your mother is hardly the parent to look to as a role model."

"I mean that w h e n I was a kid, parents called the shots. N o w I ' m a parent, kids call the shots. So we get fucked coming and going. I can't believe this." I flounced onto the couch. "I want to go to Africa, and you want to go to *New Jersey."*

"What's this about Africa? W h y do you keep bringing it up?"

"We're going ahead with AFRIWAP. *The Lonely Planet* and *TheRough Guide* are starting to squeeze us badly in Europe."

" W h a t does this edition have to do with you?"

" T h e continent is huge. Someone has to do a preliminary canvass of countries."

" S o m e o n e *other than you.* You still don't get it, do you? Maybe it was a mistake for you to think of m o t h e r h o o d as 'another country.'This is no overseas holiday. It's serious—"

" We're talking about human lives, Jim!"

You didn't even smile. " H o w would you feel if he lost a hand reaching through that elevator gate? If he got asthma from all this crap in the air? If some loser kidnapped him from your grocery cart?"

" T h e truth is, *you* want a house," I charged." *You* want a yard.

You have this dorky N o r m a n Rockwell vision of D a d d y d o m , and *you* want to coach Litde League."

" G o t that right." You straightened victoriously at the changing table, Kevin in his blazing fresh Pampers on your hip. " A n d there are two of us, and one of you."

It was a ratio I was destined to confront repeatedly.

D E C E M B E R 2 5 , 2 0 0 0

Dear Franklin,

I agreed to visit my mother for Christmas, so I ' m writing from Racine. At the last m i n u t e — w h e n he f o u n d out I was c o m i n g —

Giles decided that his family would spend the holiday with his in-laws instead. I could choose to feel injured, and I do miss my brother if only as someone with w h o m to m o c k my mother, but she's getting so frail n o w at seventy-eight that o u r patronizing despair on her behalf seems unfair. Besides, I understand. Around Giles and his kids, I never mention Kevin, Mary's lawsuit; a little traitorously, I never even mention you. But through

benign discussion of the snow, whether to put pine nuts in the *sarma*, I still personify a horror that, in defiance of my mother's locked doors and sealed windows, has gotten inside.

Giles resents my having co-opted the role of family tragic figure. He only moved as far as Milwaukee, and the child at closer hand is always chopped liver, while for decades I made a living from being as far away from R a c i n e as I could get. Like De Beers restricting the supply of diamonds, I made myself scarce, a cheap gambit in Giles's view for artificially manufacturing the precious.

N o w I have stooped even lower, using my son to corner the market on pity. Having kept his head below the parapet working for Budweiser, he's in grudging awe of anyone who's been in the newspaper. I keep trying to find some way of telling him that this is the kind of dime-store fame that the most unremarkable parent

could w i n in the sixty seconds it takes an automatic assault rifle to fire a hundred bullets. I don't feel special.

You know, there's a peculiar smell in this house that I used to find rank. R e m e m b e r h o w I used to insist that the air was thin?

My mother rarely opens a door, m u c h less airs the place out, and I was convinced that the distinctive headache that always hit me on arrival was the beginnings of carbon dioxide poisoning. But n o w the close, clinging admixture of stale lamb grease, dust, and mildew sharpened with the medicinal reek of her colored inks comforts me somehow.

For years I wrote off my mother as having no grasp of my life, but after *Thursday* I came to terms with the fact that I'd made no effort to understand hers. She and I had been distant for decades not because she was agoraphobic but because I'd been remote and unsparing. Needing kindness myself, I am kinder now, and we get on amazingly well. D u r i n g my

traveling days, I must have seemed uppity and superior, and my n e w desperation for safety has restored my status as a proper child. For my part, I have come to recognize—since any world is by definition self-enclosed and, to its inhabitants, all there is—that geography is relative. To my intrepid mother, the living r o o m could be Eastern Europe, my old bedroom Cameroon.

Of course, the Internet is the best and worst thing that ever happened to her, and she is n o w able to order anything from support hose to grape leaves over the Web. Consequently, the multitude of errands I used to run for her whenever I was h o m e is already dispatched, and I feel a little useless. I suppose it's good that technology has granted her independence— if that's what it's called.

My mother, by the way, doesn't avoid talking about Kevin at all. This m o r n i n g as we opened our few presents beside her spindly tree (ordered on-line), she noted that Kevin rarely misbehaved in the traditional sense, which always made her suspicious. All children misbehave, she said. You were better off w h e n they did so in plain view. And she recalled our visit w h e n

Kevin was about ten—old enough to k n o w better, she said. She'd just finished a stack of twenty-five one-of-a-kind Christmas cards commissioned by some wealthy Johnson Wax exec. While we were preparing *khurabia* with powdered sugar in the kitchen, he systematically snipped the cards into ragged paper snowflakes.

(You said—a mantra—he was "just trying to help.") *That boy had something missing*, she pronounced, in the past tense, as if he were dead. She was trying to make me feel better, though I worried that what Kevin was missing was a m o t h e r like mine.

In fact, I trace the flowering of my present filial grace to a gasping p h o n e call the night of *Thursday* itself. To w h o m else was I to turn but my

mother? T h e primitiveness of the tie was sobering. For the life of me, I can't remember a single time that Kevin—distraught over a scraped knee, a falling-out with a playmate—has called me.

I could tell from her collected, formal greeting, *Hello, Sonya Khatchadourian speaking*, that she hadn't seen the evening news.

Mother? was all I could manage—plaintive, grade-school. T h e ensuing heavy breathing must have sounded like a crank call. I felt suddenly protective. If she lived in mortal dread of a trip to Walgreens, h o w would she confront the vastly m o r e appreciable terror of a murderous grandson? For pity's sake, I thought, she's seventy-six, and she already lives through a mail slot. After this, she'll never pull the covers off her head.

But Armenians have a talent for sorrow.You know, she wasn't even *surprised?*. She was somber but remained composed, and for once, even at her advanced age, she acted and sounded like a real parent. I could depend on her, she assured me, an assertion that hitherto would have made me scoff. It was almost as if all that dread of hers finally redeemed itself; as if on some level she was relieved that her whole batten-down-the-hatches gestalt hadn't proved baseless. After all, she'd been here before, where the rest of the world's tragedy lapped at her shore. She may have hardly left the house, but of everyone in our family, she most profoundly appreciated h o w the careless way adjacent people hve their lives

can threaten all you hold dear. Most of her extended family had been slaughtered, her very husband picked off by Japanese like skeet; Kevin's rampage fit right in. Indeed, the occasion seemed to liberate something in her, not only love but bravery, if they are not in many respects the same thing. Mindful that the police were b o u n d to expect me to remain on hand, I declined her invitation to Racine. Gravely, my shut-in mother *offered to fly to me.*

It was shortly after Siobhan j u m p e d ship (she never did come back, and I had to post her last paycheck to A m E x in Amsterdam) that Kevin stopped screaming. Stopped cold. Maybe, his nanny dispatched, he felt his mission accomplished. Maybe he'd finally concluded that these high-decibel workouts did not reprieve him from the remorseless progress of life-in-a-room and so were not worth the energy. Or maybe he was hatching some n e w gambit n o w that Mother had grown inured to his wailing, as one does in the latter stages of a neglected car alarm.

W h i l e I was hardly complaining, Kevin's silence had an oppressive quality. First off, it was truly silence—total, closed-mouth, cleansed of the coos and soft cries that most children emit w h e n exploring the infinitely fascinating three square feet of their nylon net playpen. Second, it was inert. Although he was n o w able to walk—which, like every skill to come, he learned in private—there didn't appear to be anywhere he especially wanted to go. So he would sit, in the playpen or on the floor, for hours, his unlit eyes stirring with an unfocused disaffection. I couldn't understand w h y he didn't at least c o m b up a little aimless fluff from our Armenian rugs, even if he refused to loop colored rings on their plastic spike or crank the noisemaker on his Busy Box. I would surround him with toys (there was hardly a day you didn't come h o m e with a n e w one), and he would stare at t h e m or kick one away. He did not play.

You'd r e m e m b e r that period largely as the time we were fighting about w h e t h e r to move and w h e t h e r I w o u l d take that long trip to Africa. B u t I mostly r e m e m b e r staying h o m e

on those draggy days after we'd once again lost a nanny, and mysteriously they did n o t pass any faster than the ones during w h i c h Kevin bellowed.

Previous to m o t h e r h o o d I had imagined having a small child at elbow as something like owning a bright, companionable dog, but our son exerted a m u c h denser presence than any pet.

Every m o m e n t , I was hugely aware he was there. T h o u g h his n e w phlegmatism made it easier to edit copy at home, I felt watched and grew restive. I'd roll balls to Kevin's feet, and once I did entice h i m into rolling it back. Excited, ridiculously so, I rolled it back; he rolled it back. But once I rolled it between his legs a third time, that was that. W i t h a listless glance, he left the ball at his knee. I did begin to think, Franklin, that he was smart. In sixty seconds, he got it: Were we to pursue this "game," the ball would continue to roll back and forth along the same trajectory, an exercise that was overtly pointless. I was never able to engage h i m in it again.

This impenetrable flatness of his, combined with a reticence extending well past the point that all your manuals forecast first attempts at speech, compelled me to consult our pediatrician.

Dr. Foulke was reassuring, ready with the conventional parental sop that "normal" developmental behavior embraced a range of idiosyncratic stalls and leaps, though he did subject our son to a battery of simple tests. I'd expressed concern that Kevin's unresponsiveness was due to a hearing deficit; whenever I called his name, he turned with such an in-his-own-good-time deadpan that it was impossible to tell w h e t h e r he had heard me.

Yet though he was not necessarily *interested* in anything I said, his ears worked fine, and my theory that the volume of his infantile screaming had damaged his vocal chords was not b o r n e out by medical science. I even voiced a w o r r y that Kevin's withdrawn quality might indicate early signs of autism, but apparently he did not display the telltale rocking and repetitive behavior of such unfortunates trapped in their o w n world; if Kevin was trapped, it was in the same world as yours and mine. In fact, the most I

wrested from Dr. Foulke was his musing that Kevin "was a floppy little boy, wasn't he?" in reference to a certain physical slackness.

The doctor would lift our son's arm, let go, and the arm would drop hke a wet noodle.

So insistent was I that Foulke pin a disability to our son, stamp a name-brand American syndrome on Kevin's forehead, that the pediatrician must have thought me one of those neurotic mothers w h o craved distinction for her child but w h o in our civilization's latter-day degeneracy could only conceive of the exceptional in terms of deficiency or affliction. And honestly, I did want him to find something wrong with Kevin. I yearned for our son to have some small disadvantage or flaw to kindle my sympathy. I was not made of stone, and whenever I espied a little boy with a piebald cheek or webbed fingers waiting patiently in the outer office, my heart went out to him, and I quivered to consider what tortures he would suffer at recess. I wanted to at least feel sorry for Kevin, which seemed a start. Did I truly wish our son to have webbed fingers? Well, yes, Franklin. If that's what it took.

He was underweight, in consequence of which he never had those rounded, blunt features of the roly-poly toddler that can make even homely children adorable for that photogenic window between two and three. Instead his face had that ferret-like sharpness from his earliest years. If nothing else, I'd have liked to have been able to gaze later at photographs of a pudgy heartbreaker and wonder what went wrong. Instead, the snaps I have (and you took stacks) all document a sobersided wariness and disturbing self-possession. The narrow olive face is instantly familiar: recessed eyes, sheer straight nose with a wide bridge and slight hook, thin hps set in an obscure determination. Those pictures are recognizable not only for their resemblance to the class photograph that appeared in all the papers but for their resemblance to me.

But I wanted him to look like you. His whole geometry was based on the triangle and yours on the square, and there is something cunning and insinuating about acute angles, stable

and trustworthy about the perpendicular. I didn't expect to have a litde Franklin Plaskett clone running around the house, but I wanted to glance at my son's profile and apprehend with a flash of lambent joy that he had your strong tall forehead— rather than one that shelved sharply over eyes that might begin as strikingly deep-set but were destined with age to look sunken. (I should know.) I was gratified that his appearance was noticeably Armenian, but I had hoped that your robust Anglo optimism would quicken the sluggish, grudge-bearing blood of my O t t o m a n heritage, brightening his sallow skin with ruddy hints of football games in fall, highlighting his sullen black hair with glints of Fourth of July fireworks. Moreover, the furtiveness of his gaze and the secrecy of his silence seemed to confront me with a miniature version of my o w n dissembling. He was watching me and I was watching me, and under this dual scrutiny I felt doubly self-conscious and false. If I found our son's visage too shrewd and contained, the same shifty mask of opacity stared back at me w h e n I brushed my teeth.

I was averse to plunking Kevin in front of the television. I hated children's programming; the animation was hyperactive, the educational shows boppy, insincere, and condescending. But he seemed so understimulated. So one afternoon w h e n I had b u r n e d out on bubbling, *It's time for our juice!* I switched on the after-school cartoons.

"I don like dat."

I reeled away from the beans I was tailing for dinner, certain from the lifeless monotonic delivery that this line had not escaped from the A-Team. I rushed to turn the TV d o w n low and stooped to our son. " W h a t did you say?"

He repeated levelly, "I d o n like dat."

W i t h more urgency than I may ever have applied to this foundering relationship, I took one of his shoulders in each hand.

"Kevin? *What do you like?"*

It was a question that he was not prepared to answer and that to this day at the age of seventeen he is still unable to answer to

his o w n satisfaction, m u c h less to mine. So I returned to what he *didn't like,* a subject that would soon prove inexhaustible.

"Sweetheart? W h a t is it you want to stop?"

He batted a hand against the television tube. "I don like dat.

Turn id ov."

I stood up and marveled. O h , I turned the cartoon off all right, thinking *Christ, I have a toddler with good taste.* As if myself the child, I was impelled to experiment with my riveting n e w toy, to poke at its buttons and see what lit up.

"Kevin, do you want a cookie?"

"I hate cookies."

"Kevin, will you talk to Daddy w h e n he comes home?"

" N o t if I don feew wike it."

"Kevin, can you say ' M o m m y ' ? "

I'd been queasy about what I wanted our son to call me.

Mommy sounded babyish, *Ma* rube-ish, *Mum* servile. *Mama* was the stuff of battery-operated doll babies, *Mom* rang earnest and gee-whiz, *Mother* seemed formal for 1986. Looking back, I w o n d e r if I did not like being called any of the popular names for m o t h e r because I did not hke—well, because I was still ill at ease with being one. Little matter, since the predictable answer was, " N o . "

W h e n you came home, Kevin refused to repeat his loquacious performance, but I recited it word for word. You were ecstatic.

" C o m p l e t e sentences, right off the bat! I've read that what seem like late bloomers can be incredibly bright.They're perfectionists.

They don't want to try it out on you until they've got it right."

I nursed a competing theory: that, having secredy been able to talk for years, he had enjoyed eavesdropping on the unwitting; that he was a spy. And I attended less to his grammar than to what he said. I k n o w this kind of assertion always gets up your nose, but I did sometimes consider that, between us, I was the more interested in Kevin. (In my mind's eye, I can see you going apoplectic.) I mean, interested in Kevin as Kevin really was, not Kevin as Your Son, w h o had continually to battle against the

formidable fantasy paragon in your head, with w h o m he was in far more ferocious competition than he ever was with Celia. For example, that evening I remarked, "I've been waiting ages to find out what's going on behind those piercing little eyes."

You shrugged. "Snakes and snails and puppy dog tails."

See? Kevin was (and remains) a mystery to me. You had that insouciant boy-thing going and blithely assumed that you had been there yourself and there was nothing to find out. A n d you and I may have differed on so profound a level as the nature of h u m a n character. You regarded a child as a partial creature, a simpler f o r m of life, which evolved into the complexity of adulthood in open view. But from the instant he was laid on my breast I perceived Kevin Khatchadourian as pre-extant, with a vast, fluctuating interior life whose subdety and intensity would if anything diminish with age. Most of all, he seemed hidden from me, while your experience was one of sunny, leisurely access.

Anyway, for several weeks he would talk to me during the day, and w h e n you came h o m e he clammed up. At the clank of the elevator, he'd shoot me a complicitous glance: Let's put one over on Daddy. I may have found a

guilty pleasure in the exclusivity of my son's discourse, thanks to which I was apprised that he *did not like* rice pudding with or without cinnamon and he *did not like* Dr. Seuss books and he *did not like* the nursery rhymes p u t to music that I checked out from the library. Kevin had a specialized vocabulary; he had genius for N-words.

T h e sole m e m o r y I retain of any proper childhood glee during this era was at his third birthday party, w h e n I was busy pouring cranberry juice in his sippy cup, and you were tying ribbons on packages that you would only have to untie for him minutes later.You had brought h o m e a three-tiered marble layer cake from Vinierro's on First Avenue that was decorated with a custom butter-cream baseball theme and had placed it proudly on the table in front of his booster chair. In the two minutes our backs were turned, Kevin displayed m u c h the same gift that he'd exhibited earlier that week by methodically pulling all the

stuffing through a small hole in what we thought was his favorite rabbit. My attention was drawn by a dry chuckle that I could only characterize as a nascent snicker. Kevin's hands were those of a plasterer. And his expression was rapturous.

Such a young birthday boy, not yet fully comprehending the concept of birthdays, had no reason to grasp the concept of *slices.*

You laughed, and after you'd gone to so m u c h trouble I was glad you could take the mishap as comedy. But as I cleaned his hands with a damp cloth, my chortle was muted. Kevin's technique of plunging both hands mid-cake and spreading its whole body apart in a single surgical m o t i o n was uneasily reminiscent of those scenes in medical shows w h e n the patient is "coding" and some doctor yells,"Crack 'em!" Gorier programs toward the end of the millennium left little to the imagination: T h e ribcage is riven with an electric hacksaw, the ribs pulled back, and then our handsome ER doc plunges into a red sea. Kevin hadn't simply played with that cake. He had ripped its heart out.

In the end, of course, we finalized the inevitable swap: I would license you to find us a house across the Hudson; you would license me to take my reconnaissance trip to Africa. My deal was pretty raw, but then desperate people will often opt for short-term relief in exchange for long-term losses. So I sold my birthright for a bowl of soup.

I don't mean that I regret that African sojourn, though in terms of texture it was badly timed. M o t h e r h o o d had dragged me d o w n to what we generally think of as the lower matters: eating and shitting. And that's ultimately what Africa is about.

This may be ultimately what every country is about, but I have always appreciated efforts to disguise that fact, and I might have been better off traveling to more decorative nations, where the bathrooms have roseate soaps and the meals at least come with a garnish of radicchio. Brian had c o m m e n d e d children as a marvelous antidote for jadedness; he said that you get to re-appreciate the world through their awestruck eyes and everything

that you were once tired of suddenly looks vibrant and new.

Well, the cure-all had sounded terrific, better than a facelift or a prescription for Valium. But I am disheartened to report that whenever I saw the world through Kevins eyes, it tended to appear unusually dreary. T h r o u g h Kevin's eyes the whole world looked like Africa, people milling and scrounging and squatting and lying d o w n to die.

Yet amid all that squalor I still couldn't locate a safari company that could properly be considered budget; most charged hundreds of dollars per day. Likewise, the lodging divided off in a way that eliminated my target market: It was either luxurious and pricey, or filthy and too cut-rate. A variety of Italian and Indian restaurants were a good value, but authentic African eateries served mostly unseasoned goat. Transport was appalling, the train lines prone to simply stop, the aircraft decrepit, the pilots fresh

from Bananarama Flight School, the driving kamikaze, the buses bursting with cackling passengers three times over capacity and aflap with chickens.

I k n o w I sound finicky. I had been to the continent once in my twenties and had been entranced. Africa had seemed truly *elsewhere.* Yet in the interim, the wildlife population had plummeted, the h u m a n one burgeoned; the intervening rise in misery was exponential. This time appraising the territory with a professional eye, I discounted whole countries as out of the question. Uganda was still picking corpses from the mouths of crocodiles discarded by A m i n and Obote; Liberia was ruled by that murderous idiot, Samuel Doe; even in those days, Hutus and Tutsis were hacking each other to pieces in Burundi. Zaire was in the grip of M o b u t u Sese Seko, while Mengistu continued to ransack Ethiopia and R e n a m o ran amok in Mozambique. If I listed South Africa, I risked having the entire series boycotted in the States. As for the bits that were left, you may have accused me of being *unnurturing,* but I was reluctant to take responsibility for callow young Westerners trooping off to these perilous parts armed only with a distinctive sky-blue volume of *A Wing and a*

Prayer. I was b o u n d to read about robberies inTsavo that left three dead in a ditch for 2,000 shillings, a camera, and a guidebook and feel certain it was all my fault. As Kevin would later illustrate, I attract liability, real or imagined.

So I began to conclude that the marketing people's heads were up their backsides. They had researched the demand, but not the supply. I did not have faith that even our intrepid army of college students and my thoroughgoing staff could put together a solitary volume that would protect its users from making the grossest of missteps for which they could pay so dearly that a continent full of bargains would still seem overpriced. For once I did feel motherly—toward customers like Siobhan, and the last place I'd want pastily complected, there's-good-in-all-of-us Siobhan to end up was in a scorching, pitiless Nairobi slum. A F R I W A P was a nonstarter.

B u t my greatest disappointment was in myself. While rehnquishing the idea of A F R I W A P might have freed me to gallivant about the continent without taking notes, I'd grown dependent on research for a sense of purpose on the road. Released from an itinerary dictated by conveniently tabbed chapters, I felt aimless. Africa is a lousy place to wonder incessantly what you are doing there, though there is something about its careless, fetid, desperate cities that presses the question.

I could not shut you and Kevin from my mind. That I missed you fiercely served as an aching reminder that I had been missing you since Kevin was born. Away, I felt not emancipated but remiss, sheepish that unless you'd finally solved the nanny problem you'd have to cart him with you in the pickup to scout. Everywhere I went, I felt laden, as if slogging the potholed streets of Lagos with five-pound leg weights: I had started something back in N e w York, it was not finished by any means, I was shirking, and what's more, what I had started was going badly. That m u c h I faced; that m u c h my isolation was good for. After all, the one thing you cannot escape in Africa is children.

In the latter legs of the t h r e e - m o n t h trip, w h i c h you'll recall

I cut short, I made resolutions. O n e too many sojourns—this one launched less in a spirit of exploration than simply to make a point, to prove that my hfe had *not* changed, that I was still young, still curious, still free—was only proving beyond doubt that my life had indeed changed, that at forty-one I was not remotely young, that I had truly sated a certain glib curiosity about other countries, and that there was a variety of liberty of which I could no longer avail myself without sinking the one tiny island of permanence, of durable meaning and lasting desire, that I had managed to annex in this vast, arbitrary sea of international indifference.

Camping in Harare's airport lounge on gritty linoleum because there were no seats and the plane was eight hours late, the whole 737 having been appropriated by some government minister's wife w h o wanted to go

shopping in Paris, I seemed to have unaccountably lost my old serene certainty that inconvenience (if not outright disaster) was the springboard for nearly every proper adventure abroad. I was no longer persuaded by that old saw planted in every AWAP intro that the worst thing that can happen to any trip is for everything to go smoothly. Instead, like any standardWestern tourist, I was impatient for air-conditioning and disgruntled that the only available drinks were Fanta orange, which I did not like. With the concessions' refrigeration broken down, they were boiling.

That sweaty, protracted delay allowed me to contemplate that so far my commitment to motherhood had been toe-in-the-water. In a funny way, I resolved, I had to remake that arduous decision of 1982 and j u m p into parenthood with both feet. I had to get pregnant with Kevin all over again. Like his birth, raising our son could be a transporting experience, but only if I stopped fighting it. As I was at pains to teach Kevin for years thereafter (to little effect), rarely is the object of your attentions innately dull or compelling. Nothing is interesting if you are not interested. In vain, I had been waiting for Kevin to prove out, to demonstrate as I stood arms folded that he was worthy of my ardor. That was

too much to demand of a little boy, w h o would only be as lovable to me as I allowed him to be. It was past time that I at least met Kevin halfway.

Flying into Kennedy, I was bursting with determination, optimism, and goodwill. But in retrospect, I do feel obliged to observe that I was at my most passionate about our son w h e n he was not there.

D E C E M B E R 2 7 , 2 0 0 0

Dear Franklin,

Having asked gently beforehand if I was up to it, tonight my m o t h e r had a litde holiday hen party here, and I think she regretted her timing. As it happened, yesterday in Wakefield, Massachusetts, a very large, unhappy m a n — a software engineer named Michael M c D e r m o t t , w h o the w h o l e nation n o w knows is a science fiction fan, m u c h as most m e n off the street are familiar with our son's predilection for undersized clothing— walked into Edgewater Technology with a shotgun, an automatic, and a pistol and murdered seven of his coworkers. I gather Mr. M c D e r m o t t was upset— and here I am, conversant with details of his financial life, d o w n to the fact that his six-year-old car was on the verge of repossession— that his employers had garnished his wages for back taxes.

I couldn't help but think of your parents, since they don't live far from Wakefield. Your father was always concerned that his top-of-the-line appliances have a fine sense of proportion, a preoccupation that surely extends to behavioral ratios like grievance to redress. Your parents must imagine that the world of the physically preposterous, which doesn't respect *materials,* is closing in on them.

Having long since given up on the painful charade of inviting Sonya Khatchadourian for soirees in return and suffering the kind of fanciful excuses she always supplied me for w h y she could not attend opening night of my school play, these old birds had sampled my mother's *lahmajoon* and sesame-topped *ziloogs* many times before and were disinclined to dwell on the finger food.

Instead, with some diffidence, given the guest of honor, they were all dying to talk about Michael M c D e r m o t t . O n e dowager c o m m e n t e d sorrowfully that she could see h o w a young man might feel rejected with a nickname like "Mucko." My crusty Aunt Aleen muttered that her o w n ongoing fight w i t h the I R S — a $17 disputed underpayment in 1991 had over the years ballooned from interest and late fees to over $1,300—-might soon move her to firearms herself. But they all subdy deferred to me, the resident expert with insight into the twitchy mind.

I was finally forced to remind these w o m e n firmly that this friendless, overweight loner and I had never met. It seemed to register all at once that no one in this country specialized in plain old murder these days, any more

than a lawyer would study plain old Law. There was Workplace Massacre, and there were School Shootings, quite another field of concentration altogether, and I sensed a collective embarrassment in the room, as if they'd all rung the Sales Department w h e n they should have asked for Customer Relations. Since it's still too dangerous to bring up "Florida" in company without being sure that everyone is on-side, someone prudently changed the subject back to the *lahmajoon.*

Anyway, w h o says crime doesn't pay? I doubt the I R S will ever see a dime of Mucko's money now, and the forty-two-year-old tax cheat is b o u n d to cost Uncle Sam a far prettier penny in prosecution costs than the I R S would ever have squeezed from his paycheck.

That's the way I think now, of course, since the price of justice is no longer an abstract matter in my o w n life but a hard-nosed tally of dollars and cents. And I do often have little flashbacks of that trial—the civil trial. T h e criminal one is almost a blank.

"Ms. Khatchadourian," I will hear Harvey begin stentoriously on his re-direct. " T h e prosecution has made m u c h of the fact that

you ran a company in Manhattan while leaving your son to the care of strangers, and that w h e n he turned four you were away in Africa."

"At the time I was unaware that having a life was illegal."

"But after your return from this trip you hired someone else to oversee the day-to-day business of your firm, in order to be a better mother to your child?"

"That's right."

"Didn't you take over as his primary caregiver? In fact, aside from occasional baby-sitters, didn't you cease to bring in outside help

altogether?"

"Frankly, we gave up on hiring a nanny because we couldn't find anyone to put up with Kevin for more than a few weeks."

Harvey looked sour. His client was self-destructive. I imagined that this quality made me special, but my lawyer's fatigued expression suggested that I was a set type.

"But you were concerned that he needed continuity, and that's w h y you terminated this revolving door of young girls.You no longer went into the office nine-to-five."

"Yes."

"Ms. Khatchadourian, you loved your work, correct? It gave you great personal satisfaction. So this decision was a considerable sacrifice, all for the sake of your child?"

" T h e sacrifice was enormous," I said. "It was also futile."

" N o further questions, your honor." We had rehearsed *enormous,* period; he shot me a glare.

Was I, back in 1987, already planning my defense? T h o u g h my open-ended leave from AWAP was on a grand, over-compensatory scale, it was cosmetic. I thought it *looked good.* I'd never conceived of myself as someone w h o dwelled u p o n what other people thought, but hoarders of guilty secrets are inevitably consumed with appearances.

Hence, w h e n you two m e t my plane at Kennedy I stooped to h u g Kevin first. He was still in that disconcerting rag-doll phase,

"floppy"; he didn't h u g back. B u t the strength and duration of my o w n embrace paraded my born-again conversion in Harare.

"I've missed you so m u c h ! " I said."Mommy's got two surprises, sweetheart! I brought you a present. B u t I ' m also going to promise that M o m m y ' s never, ever going away for this long again!"

Kevin just got floppier. I stood up and arranged his willful shocks of hair, embarrassed. I was playing my part, but onlookers might have deduced from my child's unnatural lassitude that I kept h i m handcuffed to the water heater in the basement.

I kissed you. Although I'd thought children liked to see their parents be affectionate with one another, Kevin stamped impatiently and mooed, dragging at your hand. Maybe I was mistaken. I never saw my m o t h e r kiss my father. I wish I had.

You cut the kiss short and mumbled,"It may take a while, Eva.

For kids this age, three months is a lifetime. They get mad. T h e y think you're never coming back."

I was about to josh that Kevin seemed more p u t out that I *had* come back, but I caught myself; one of our first sacrifices to family life was lightness of heart. "What's this *uherr, uherr!* thing?"

I asked as Kevin continued to tug at you and moo.

"Cheese doodles," you said brighdy. " T h e latest must-have.

Okay, buster! Let's go find you a bag of glow-in-the-dark petrochemicals, kiddo!" And you tottered off d o w n the terminal in tow, leaving me to wheel my luggage.

In the pickup, I had to remove several viscous doodles from the passenger seat, in various stages of dissolve. Kevin's dietary enthusiasm did not extend to eating the snacks; he sucked them, leeching off their neon coating and imbuing them with enough saliva to melt.

"Most kids like sugar?" you explained zestfully. " O u r s likes salt." Apparently a sodium fetish was superior to a sweet tooth in every way.

" T h e Japanese think they're opposites," I said, slipping my gooey collection out the window. T h o u g h there was a shallow

back seat, Kevin's child seat was fastened between us, and I was sorry that I couldn't, as I used to, place a hand on your thigh.

" M o m m e r farted," said Kevin, n o w halving the difference between *Mommy* and *Mother.* (It was cute. It must have been.)

"It stinks."

"That's not the kind of thing you have to announce, Kevin," I said tighdy. I'd had that mashed beans and banana side dish at the Norfolk before catching the plane.

" H o w about Junior's?" you proposed. "It's on the way, and they're kid-friendly."

It wasn't like you to fail to consider that I'd been in transit from Nairobi for fifteen hours, so I might be a little tired, bloated from the flight, overfed with airline Danishes and cheddar packets, and less than in the m o o d for a loud, camp, brighdy lit hash house whose sole redeeming feature was cheesecake. I'd privately hoped that you'd have found a sitter and met my plane alone, to sweep me off to a quiet drink where I could bashfully reveal my turned maternal leaf. In other words, I wanted to get away from Kevin the better to confide to you h o w very m u c h m o r e time I planned to spend with him.

"Fine," I said faindy. "Kevin, either eat those cheese thingies or I'll put them away. D o n ' t crumble t h e m all over the truck."

"Kids are messy, Eva!" you said merrily."Loosen up!"

Kevin shot me a crafty orange smile and fisted a doodle into my lap.

At the restaurant, Kevin scorned the booster seat as for babies.

Since clearly parenthood turns you overnight into an insufferable prig, I lectured, "ALL right, Kevin. But remember:You *only* get to sit like an adult if you *act* like one."

" N Y E E nyee, nyeh nyeh. Nyeh nyeh-wyee-nyeh: N y e h *nyeh-*

nyeh nyehnyeh nyeh-nyeh nyeh *nyeh-* nyeh nyeh-nyeh *nyee* nyeh nyeh."With waltzing mockery, he had captured my stern cadence and preachy inflection with such perfect pitch that he might have a future singing covers as a lounge singer.

" C u t it out, Kevin." I tried to sound offhand.

"Nye-nye *nyee*, nye nye!"

I turned to you. " H o w long has *this* been going on?"

" N y e h nyeh nyeh N Y E E nyeh nyeh-nyeh nyeh?"

"A month? It's a phase. He'll grow o u t of it."

" N y e h nyeh? Nyeh-nyeh nyeee. N y e h nyeh nyeh-nyeh-nyeh."

"I can't wait," I said, increasingly loath to let anything out of my m o u t h , lest it come parroting back to me in *nyeh-nyeh-speak.*

You wanted to order Kevin onion rings, and I objected that he must have been eating salty crap all afternoon. "Look," you said. "Like you, I ' m grateful w h e n he eats anything. Maybe he's craving some trace element, like iodine. Trust nature, I say."

"Translation: You like eaty-whizzes and curly-munchies, too, and you've been bonding over snack food. Order him a hamburger patty. He needs

some protein."

W h e n our waitress read back our order, Kevin *nye-nye-e* d throughout: "NYEE-nyeh nyeh-nyeh, nyeh nyeh-nyeh nyehnyeh-nyeeeh" apparendy translates "garden salad, house dressing on the side."

" W h a t a cute little boy," she said, glancing with desperation at the wall clock.

W h e n his patty came, Kevin retrieved the tall, faceted saltcellar with huge pour-holes and covered the beef with salt until it looked like M o u n t Kilimanjaro after a recent snow. Disgusted, I reached over with a table knife to scrape it off, but you held my arm. " W h y can't you let anything with this little guy be fun, or funny?" you chided quietly. " T h e salt thing is a phase too, and he'll grow out of it too, and later we'll tell h i m about it w h e n he's older and it'll make him feel he had plenty of quirky personality even w h e n he was a little kid. It's life. It's good life."

"I doubt Kevin's going to have a hard time finding quirks."

Although the sense of maternal mission that had powered me through my last fortnight was fast abating, I had made myself a promise, Kevin a promise on arrival, implicidy you one as well.

I took a breath. "Franklin, I made a major decision while I was gone."

W i t h the classic timing of dining out, our waitress arrived with my salad and your cheesecake. H e r feet gritted on the lino.

Kevin had emptied the saltcellar onto the floor.

" T h a t lady has p o o p on her face." Kevin was pointing at the birthmark on our waitress's left cheek, three inches across and roughly the shape of Angola. She'd slathered beige concealer over the big brown blotch, but most of the makeup had w o r n off.

Like most disguises, the cover-up was worse than honest flaw, a lesson I had yet to register on my own account. Before I could stop him, Kevin asked her directly, " W h y don't you clean your face? It's poopy."

I apologized profusely to the girl, w h o couldn't have been m u c h more than eighteen and had no doubt suffered from that blemish her whole life. She managed a dismal smile and promised to bring my dressing.

I wheeled to our son. "You k n e w that spot wasn't 'poop,'

didn't you?"

" N y e h N Y E E nyeh nyeh nyeh-nyeh *nyee*, nyeh-nyeh nyeh?"

Kevin skulked in the booth, his eyes at half-mast and glittering.

He'd placed his fingers on the table and his nose against its rim, but I could tell from that telltale sparky squint that below the table lurked a grin: wide, tight-lipped, and strangely forced.

"Kevin, you k n o w that hurt her feelings, didn't you?" I said.

" H o w would you like it if I told you your face was 'poopy'?"

"Eva, kids don't understand that grown-ups can be touchy about their looks."

"Are you sure they don't understand that? You read this somewhere?"

" C a n we not ruin our first afternoon out together?" you implored. " W h y do you always have to think the worst of him?"

" W h e r e did that come from?" I asked, looking perplexed. "It sounds m o r e as if *you* always think the worst of me."

Innocent mystification would remain my tack for the next three years. Meantime, the m o o d had gone all wrong for my announcement, so I got it over with as unceremoniously as I could. I ' m afraid my intentions came out as defiant: Stick that in your pipe and smoke it, if you think I ' m such a rotten mother.

"Wow," you said. "Are you sure? That's a big step."

"I remembered what you said about Kevin and talking, that maybe he didn't for so long because he wanted to do it right. Well, I ' m a perfectionist, too. A n d I ' m n o t doing AWAP

or m o t h e r h o o d right. At the office, I ' m continually taking days off with no warning, and publications get behind schedule.

Meanwhile, Kevin wakes up and has no idea who's taking care of him today, his mother or some hopeless hireling who'll hightail it by the end of the week. I ' m thinking mosdy until Kevin is in primary school. Hey, it might even be good for W&P. Bring in a new perspective, fresh ideas. T h e series may be overly dominated by my voice."

" You," shock-horror, "domineering?"

"NYEEEEEEE? Nyeh-nyeh *nyeeeeh* nyeh?"

"Kevin, stop it! That's enough. Let M o m m e r and Daddy talk—"

" N Y E H - n y e h , N Y E E E E nyeh—! N y e h n y e h - N Y E E H — ! "

"I mean it, Kevin, quit the *nyeh-nyeh* or we're leaving."

" N y e h N Y E E nyeh, nyeh nyeh, nyeh nyeh *nyeh-nyeh* nyeh nyeh *NYEEnyehl"*

I don't k n o w w h y I threatened h i m with departure, lacking any evidence that he wanted to stay. This was my first taste of what would b e c o m e a chronic c o n u n d r u m : h o w to punish a boy with an almost Zen-like indifference to whatever you might deny him.

"Eva, you're just making everything w o r s e — "

" H o w do you propose to get h i m to shut up?"

" N y e h nyeh N Y E E E nyeh -*nyeeh* nyeh nyeh-nyeh nyeh nyeeeeeeenyeeeeeeee?"

I slapped him. It wasn't very hard. He looked happy.

"Where'd you learn that trick?" you asked darkly. A n d it was a trick: This was the first sentence of mealtime conversation that did n o t get translated into *nyeh-nyeh.*

"Franklin, he was getting louder. People were starting to look over."

N o w Kevin started to wail. His tears were a bit late, in my view. I wasn't moved. I left him to it.

"They're looking over because you hit him," you said sotto voce, lifting our son and cuddling h i m into your lap as his weeping escalated to a shriek. "It's not done anymore, Eva. N o t here. I think they've passed a law or something. Or they might as weE have. It's considered assault."

"I smack my o w n kid, and I get arrested?"

"There's a consensus-—that violence is no way to get your point across. W h i c h it sure as heck isn't. I don't want you to do that again, Eva. *Ever."*

So: I slap Kevin.You slap me. I got the picture.

" C a n we please get out of here?" I proposed coldly. Kevin was winding d o w n to lurching sobs, but he could easily milk the decrescendo another good ten minutes. Christ, it was practically a love pat. W h a t a little performer.

You signaled for the biE."This is hardly the context in which I wanted to make *my* announcement," you said, wiping Kevin's nose with a napkin.

"But I have some news, too. I bought us a house."

I did a double take. "You *bought* us a house. You didn't find one for me to look at. It's a done deal."

"If I didn't p o u n c e it was going to be snapped up by somebody else. Besides, you weren't interested. I thought you'd be pleased, glad it's over."

"WeE.There's only so pleased I ' m going to get over something that wasn't my idea in the first place."

"That's it, isn't it?You can't get behind anything that isn't your

o w n pet project. If you didn't personally cook up S U B U R B A W A P

then you're all disaffected. G o o d luck doing all that delegating at the office. It doesn't come naturally."

You left a generous tip. T h e extra three bucks, I inferred, was to cover those *poopy face* cracks. Your motions were mechanical.

I could see you were hurt. You'd searched far and wide for this house, you'd been looking forward to delivering your big news, and you must have been excited about the property or you wouldn't have bought it.

" I ' m sorry," I whispered as we walked out, and other patrons peered furtively at our party. " I ' m just tired. I *am* pleased. I can't wait to see it."

" N y e h *nyeh*- nyeh. Nyeh-nyeh nyeh. N y e h *nyeh* n y e h . . . "

I thought, *Everyone in this restaurant is relieved we're leaving.*

I thought, *I've become one of those people I used to feel sorry for.* I thought, *And I still feel sorry for them, too.*

M o r e than ever.

4

— 152 —

JANUARY 1 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

Call it a N e w Year's resolution, since for years I've been busting to tell you: I hated that house. On sight. It never grew on me, either. Every m o r n i n g I woke to its glib surfaces, its smart design features, its sleek horizontal contours, and actively hated it.

I grant that the Nyack area, woodsy and right on the Hudson, was a good choice. You had kindly opted for R o c k l a n d C o u n t y in N e w York rather than somewhere in N e w Jersey, a state in w h i c h I ' m sure there are many lovely places to live but that had a *sound* to it that would have slain me. Nyack itself was racially integrated and, to meet the eye, down-market, with the same slight dishevelment of C h a t h a m — t h o u g h unlike Chatham, its shabby, unassuming quality was an illusion, since pretty m u c h all the n e w arrivals for decades had been stinking rich. Main Street eternally backed up with Audis and B M W s , its overpriced fajita joints and wine bars bursting, its dumpy oudying t w o - b e d r o o m clapboards listing for 700 grand, Nyack's one pretension was its lack of pretension. In contrast to Gladstone itself, I ' m afraid, a relatively n e w bedroom community to the north, whose tiny t o w n center—with fake gas street lamps, split-rail fencing, and commercial enterprises like "Ye Olde Sandwich S h o p p e " —epitomized what the British call "twee."

In fact, my heart sank w h e n you first plowed the pickup proudly up the long, pompous drive off Palisades Parade. You'd

— 153 —

told me nothing about the property, the better to "surprise" me.

Well. I was surprised. A flat-roofed, single-storied expanse of glass and sandy brick, at a glance it resembled the headquarters of some slick, do-gooding conflict-resolution outfit with more m o n e y than it k n e w what to do with, w h e r e they'd give "peace prizes" to Mary R o b i n s o n and Nelson Mandela.

H a d we never discussed what I envisioned?You must have had some idea. My fantasy house would be old, Victorian. If it had to be big it would be high, three stories and an attic, full of nooks and crannies whose original purpose had grown obsolete—slave quarters and tackle rooms, root cellars and smokehouses, dumbwaiters and widow's walks. A house that was falling to bits, that dripped history as it dropped slates, that cried out for fiddly Saturday repairs to its rickety balustrade, while the fragrant waft of pies cooling on counters drifted upstairs. I'd furnish it with secondhand sofas whose floral upholstery was faded and frayed, garage-sale drapes with tasseled tiebacks, ornate mahogany sideboards with speckled-looking glass. Beside the porch swing, struggling geraniums would spindle out of an old tin milking pail.

No one would frame our ragged quilts or auction them off as rare early American patterns w o r t h thousands; we'd throw t h e m on the bed and wear t h e m out. Like wool gathering lint, the house would seem to accumulate j u n k of its o w n accord: a bicycle with w o r n brake shoes and a flat tire; straight-backs whose dowel rods need regluing; an old corner cabinet of good w o o d but painted a hideous bright blue, which I keep saying I'm going to strip down and never do.

I won't go on, because you k n o w *exactly* what I ' m talking about. I k n o w they're hard to heat, I k n o w they're drafty. I k n o w the septic tank would leak, the electric bills run high. I k n o w you'd anguish that the old well in the backyard was a dangerous draw for neighborhood urchins, for I can picture this h o m e so vividly in my mind that I can walk across its overgrown yard with my eyes closed and fall in that well myself.

Curling out of the truck onto the semicircular concrete

turnaround in front of our n e w abode, I thought, *abode,* isn't that the word. My ideal h o m e was cozy and closed the world out; looking out onto the H u d s o n (admittedly, the view was smashing), these wide plate glass windows advertised an eternal open house.

Pink pebble-fdl with flagstone paths skirted its splay like one big welcome mat. T h e facade and central walkway were lined with stunted shrubs. No black walnut trees, no uncultivated riot of goldenrod and moss, but *shrubs.* Surrounding them? A lawn.

N o t even the sweet cool sort, whose f m e bright shoots tempt a laze with lemonade and bees, but that springy, scratchy kind, like those green abrasive scrub pads for washing dishes.

You flung open the entrance. T h e foyer dribbled into a living r o o m the size of a basketball court, and then up a couple of low stairs and there was the dining "room," partially segmented from the kitchen with a divider to pass food through—some concoction with *sun-dried tomatoes,* no doubt. I had yet to lay eyes on one door. I panicked, thinking, *There's nowhere to hide.*

"Tell me this isn't dramatic," you said.

I said honestly, " I ' m dumbstruck."

I'd have thought that a small child, let loose in a vast, unfurnished expanse of glossy w o o d e n floors blazing in insipid sunshine would go dashing about, sliding d o w n halls in socks, giggling and rampaging, utterly unfazed by the antiseptic wasteland—

wasteland, Franklin—into which he had been dropped. Instead, Kevin slackened on your hand into dead weight and had to be urged to "go

explore." He plodded to the middle of the living r o o m and sat. I'd suffered more than a few moments of alienation from my son, but just then—his eyes Little O r p h a n Annie O's and dulled over like wax buildup, hands plopping on the floorboards like fish on a d o c k — I couldn't have felt more akin.

"You've got to see the master bedroom," you said, grabbing my hand. " T h e skylights are spectacular."

"Skylights!" I said brightly.

All the angles in our massive b e d r o o m were askew, its ceiling slanted.The effect was jangled, and the evident distrust of standard parallels and perpendiculars, like the whole building's uneasiness with the concept of rooms, felt insecure.

"Something else, huh?"

"Something else!" At some indeterminate point in the nineties, expanses of teak would b e c o m e passe. We weren't there yet, but I had a premonition of the juncture.

You demonstrated our built-in teak laundry hamper, cleverly doubling as a bench, a cushion of smiley-face yellow strapped to its lid. You rolled back the doors of the closet on their gliding wheelies. T h e moving parts of the house were all silent, its surfaces smooth. T h e closet doors had no handles. N o n e of the w o o d w o r k had fixtures. Drawers had gende indents.The kitchen cabinets pushed open and shut with a click. Franklin, the whole house was on Zoloft.

You led me out the glass sliding doors to the deck. I thought, I have a *deck.* I will never shout, " I ' m on the porch!" but " I ' m on the *deck."* I told myself it was only a word. Still, the platform cried out for barbecues with neighbors I did not m u c h like. T h e swordfish steaks would be raw one minute, overcooked the next, and I would care.

Darling, I k n o w I sound ungrateful. You'd searched very hard, taking on the j o b of finding us a h o m e with all the seriousness of location scouting

for Gillette. I'm better familiar with the real estate scarcity in the area now, so I trust that every other available property you looked at was plain hideous. W h i c h this place was not. T h e builders had spared no expense. (Woe to those w h o *spare no expense.* I should know, since these are the travelers w h o scorn AWAP for holidays in "foreign" countries so comfortable that they qualify as near-death experiences.) T h e woods were precious—if in more than one sense—the taps gold-plated. T h e previous owners had commissioned it to their own exacting specifications.You had bought us some other family's Dream H o m e .

I could see it. O u r industrious couple works their way up from shoddy rentals to a series of nothing-special split-levels, until at last: an inheritance, a market upswing, a promotion. Finally they can afford to construct from the ground up *the house of their heart's desire.* T h e couple pores over blueprints, weighing where to hide every closet, how to segue gracefully between the living area and the den ("With a D O O R ! " I want to scream, but it is too late for my stodgy advice). All those innovative angles look so dynamic on paper. Even shrubs are rather adorable a quarter of an inch high.

But I have a theory about Dream Homes. N o t for nothing does "folly" mean both *foolhardy mistake* and *costly ornamental building.* Because I've never seen a Dream H o m e that works. Like ours, some of t h e m *almost* work, though unqualified disasters are equally c o m m o n . Part of the problem is that regardless of h o w m u c h m o n e y you lavish on oak baseboards, an unhistoried house is invariably cheap in another dimension. Otherwise, the trouble seems rooted in the nature of beauty itself, a surprisingly elusive quality and rarely one you can buy outright. It flees in the face of too m u c h effort. It rewards casualness, and most of all it deigns to arrive by whim, by *accident.* On my travels, I became a devotee of found art: a shaft of light on a dilapidated 1914 gun factory, an abandoned billboard whose layers have w o r n into a beguiling pentimento collage of Coca-Cola, Chevrolet, and B u r m a Shave, cut-rate pensions whose faded cushions perfecdy match, in that unplanned way, the fluttering sun-blanched curtains.

Confoundingly then, this Gladstone Xanadu, beam by beam, would have materialized into a soul-destroying disappointment.

H a d the builders cut corners, an arrogant architect taken liberties with those painstaking plans? N o , no. D o w n to the torturously blank kitchen cabinets, the visionary designs had been followed to the letter.That mausoleum on Palisades Parade came out precisely as its creators intended, and *that's* what made it so depressing.

To be fair, the gap between most people's capacity to conjure beauty from scratch and to merely recognize it w h e n they see it is the width of the Atlantic Ocean. So all evidence to the contrary, the original owners may have had pretty good taste; more's the pity if they did. Certainly the fact that those two built a horror show was no proof against my theory that they k n e w very well that they'd constructed a horror show, too. I was further convinced that neither husband nor wife ever let on to the other what a downer this vapid atrocity turned out to be, that they each braved out the pretense that it was the house of their prayers, while at the same time separately scheming, from the day they moved in, to get out.

You said yourself the place was only three years old. *Three years old?* It would have taken that long to build! W h o goes to that m u c h trouble only to leave? Maybe Mr. H o m e o w n e r was transferred to Cincinnati, though in that case he accepted the job.

W h a t else would drive him out that clunky front door besides revulsion for his o w n creation? W h o could live day after day with the deficiency of his o w n imagination made solid as brick?

" W h y is it," I asked as you led me around the sculpted backyard, "that the folks w h o built this place sold it so soon? After constructing a house that's clearly so—ambitious?"

"I got the impression they were sort of, going in different directions."

"Getting a divorce."

"Well, it's not as if that makes the property cursed or something."

I looked at you with curiosity. "I didn't say it did."

"Ifhouses passed that sort of thing along,"you blustered,"there wouldn't be a shack in the country safe for a happy marriage."

Cursed? You obviously intuited that, sensible as the suburban recourse seemed on its face—big parks, fresh air, good schools—we had drifted alarmingly astray. Yet w h a t strikes me n o w is not your foreboding, but your capacity to ignore it.

As for me, I had no premonitions. I was simply bewildered h o w I had landed, after Latvia and Equatorial Guinea, in Gladstone, N e w York. As if standing in the surf at Far Rockaway during a tide of raw sewage, I could barely keep my balance as our n e w acquisition exuded wave after wave of stark physical ugliness.

Why couldn't you see it?

Maybe because you've always had a proclivity for *rounding up.*

In restaurants, if 15 percent came to $17, you'd tip with a twenty Should we have spent a tiresome evening with n e w acquaintances, I'd write t h e m off; you'd want to give t h e m a second chance.

W h e n that Italian girl I barely knew, Marina, turned up at the loft for two nights and then your watch disappeared, I was fuming; you grew only the more convinced that you must have left it at the gym. Lunch with Brian and Louise ought to have been fun? It was fun.You seemed to be able to squint and blur off the rough edges.

As you gave me the grand tour of our n e w property, your camp counselor hard sell contrasted with a soulful look in your eyes, a pleading to play along. You talked nonstop, as if strung out on speed, and a lacing of hysteria fatally betrayed your own suspicion that 12 Palisades Parade was no formidable architectural exploit but an ostentatious flop. Still, through a complex combination of optimism and longing and bravado, you would

round it up. While a cruder name for this process is *lying,* one could make a case that delusion is a variant of generosity. After all, you practiced *rounding up* on Kevin from the day he was born.

Me, I ' m a stickler. I prefer my photographs in focus. At the risk of tautology, I like people only as m u c h as I like them. I lead an emotional life of such arithmetic precision, carried to two or three digits after the decimal, that I am even willing to allow for degrees of agreeableness in my own son. In other words, Franklin: I leave the $17.

I hope I persuaded you that I thought the house was lovely. It was the first big decision you'd ever made independently on our behalf, and I wasn't about to pee all over it just because the prospect of living there made me want to slit my wrists. Privately I concluded that the explanation wasn't so m u c h your different aesthetic, or lack of one; it's just that you were very suggestible. I hadn't been there, whispering in your ear about dumbwaiters. In my absence, you reverted to the taste of your parents.

Or an updated version of same. Palisades Parade was trying lethally to be "with it"; the house your parents budt in Gloucester,

Mass., was a traditional N e w England saltbox. But the spare-no-expense workmanship, the innocent faith in Niceness, was unmistakable.

My enjoyment of your father's motto, "Materials are everything," was not entirely at his expense. Up to a point, I saw the value of people w h o made things, and to the highest standard: Herb and Gladys built their o w n house, smoked their o w n salmon, brewed their o w n beer. B u t I had never m e t two people w h o existed so exclusively in three dimensions. T h e only times I saw your father excited were over a curly maple mantle or a creamy-headed stout, and I think it was over static physical perfection that he exalted; sitting before the fire, drinking the beer, were afterthoughts. Your mother cooked with the precision of a chemist, and we ate well on visits. H e r meringue-topped raspberry pies that might have been clipped

out of magazines, though again I would have the strong impression that it was pie-as-object that was the goal, and eating the pie, gouging into her creation, was a kind of vandalism. (H o w telling that your cadaverously thin m o t h e r is a marvelous cook but has no appetite.) If the assembly-line production of goods sounds mechanical, it felt mechanical. I was always a little reheved to get out of your parents' house, and they were so kind to me, if materially kind, that I felt churlish.

Still, everything in their house was buffed to a high, flat shine, so m u c h reflection to protect the fact that there was nothing underneath. They didn't read; there were a few books, a set of encyclopedias (the wine-colored spines w a r m e d up the den), but the only well-leafed volumes were instruction manuals, d o -

it-yourself how-to's, cookbooks, and a haggard set of *The Way Things Work*, volumes one and two. T h e y had no comprehension why anyone would seek out a film with an unhappy ending or buy a painting that wasn't pretty. They owned a top-shelf stereo with speakers worth $1,000 apiece, but only a handful of easy-listening and best-of CDs: *Opera Stoppers; Classical Greatest Hits.*

That sounds lazy, but I think it was more helpless: They didn't k n o w what music was for.

You could say that about all of life, with your family:They don't k n o w what it's for.They re big on life's mechanics; they know h o w to get its cogs to interlock, but they suspect that they're building a widget for its own sake, like one of those coffee-table knickknacks whose silver metal balls click ffuidessly back and forth until friction tires them. Your father was profoundly dissatisfied w h e n their house was finished, not because there was anything wrong with it, but because there wasn't. Its high-pressure shower head and hermetic glass stall were impeccably installed, and just as he trooped out for a generic who-cares selection of best-of C D s to feed his magisterial stereo, I could easily envision your father r u n -

ning out to roll in the dirt to provide that shower a daily raison d'etre. For that matter, their house is so neat, glossy, and pristine, so fitted out with gizmos that knead and julienne, that defrost and shoe your bagels, that it doesn't seem to need its occupants. In fact, its puking, shitting, coffee-sloshing tenants are the only blights of untidiness in an otherwise immaculate, self-sustaining biosphere.

We've talked about all this on visits of course—exhaustively, since, overfed and forty minutes from the nearest cinema, we'd resort to dissecting your parents for entertainment. T h e point is, w h e n Kevin— -*Thursday*— well, they weren't prepared.They hadn't bought the right machine, like their G e r m a n - m a d e raspberry de-seeder, that would process this turn of events and make sense of it. W h a t Kevin did wasn't rational. It didn't make a m o t o r r u n more quiedy, a pulley more efficient; it didn't brew beer or smoke salmon. It did not compute; it was *physically idiotic.*

T h e irony is, though your parents always deplored his absence of Protestant industry, those two have more in c o m m o n with Kevin than anyone I know. If they don't k n o w what life is for, what to do with it, Kevin doesn't, either; interestingly, b o t h your parents and your firstborn abhor *leisure time.* Your son always attacked this antipathy head-on, which involves a certain bravery if you think about it; he was never one to deceive himself that, by merely filling it, he was putting his time to productive use.

O h , n o — you'll remember he would sit by the h o u r stewing and

glowering and doing nothing but reviling every second of every minute of his Saturday afternoon.

For your parents, of course, the prospect of being unoccupied is frightening.They don't have the character, like Kevin, to face the void. Your father was forever puttering, greasing the machinery of daily life, although the additional convenience, once he was finished, burdened him with only more odious *leisure time.* What's more, by installing a water softener or a

garden irrigation system he had no idea whatsoever what it was he was trying to improve.

Hard water had offered the happy prospect of regular, industrious de-lime-scaling of the drain board by the kitchen sink, and he rather liked sprinkling the garden by hand. T h e difference is that your father would wittingly install the water softener for no good reason and Kevin would not. Pointlessness has never bothered your father. Life is a collection of cells and electrical pulses to him, it *is* material, which is w h y *materials are everything.* A n d this prosaic vision contents h i m — or it did. So herein lies the contrast: Kevin, too, suspects that materials are everything. He just doesn't happen to care about materials.

I'll never forget the first time I visited your parents after *Thursday.* I confess I'd put it off, and that was weak. I ' m sure it would have been colossally difficult even if you'd been able to come with me, but of course *irretrievable breakdown* prevented that. Alone, without the cartilage of their son, I was presented with the stark fact that we were no longer organically joined, and I think they both felt the same disconnect. W h e n your m o t h e r opened the door, her face turned ashen, but w h e n she asked me to come in she might have been politely ushering in a salesman for Hoover uprights.

To call your mother stiff would be unjust, but she is a great one for social form. She likes to k n o w what to do n o w and what comes next. That's why she's such a fan of elaborate meals.

She finds repose in set courses, the soup before the fish, and she doesn't resist, as I would have done, the numbing way in which preparing, serving, and cleaning up after three meals a day can

stitch up a cook's time from morning to night. She does not, as I do, struggle against convention as a constraint; she is a hazily well-meaning but unimaginative person, and she is grateful for rules.

Alas, there doesn't appear to be recorded—yet—an etiquette for afternoon tea with your former daughter-in-law after your grandson has committed mass murder.

She seated me in the formal sitting room instead of the den, which was a mistake; the rigidity of the high-backed wing chairs only served to emphasize that by contrast T h e Rules were in free fall. T h e colors of the velveteen, sea green and dusty rose, were at such variance with the glistening, livid subtext of my visit as to seem musty or faintly nauseous; these were the colors of mold.

Your mother fled to the kitchen. I was about to cry after her not to bother because I really couldn't eat a thing when I realized that to deny her this one busywork delay for which she was so thankful would be cruel. I even forced myself to eat one of her Gruyere twists later, though it made me a little sick.

Gladys is such a nervous, high-strung woman that her brittleness—and I don't mean she couldn't be warm or kind—her bodily brittleness had kept her looking much the same.

True, the lines in her forehead had rippled into an expression of permanent perplexity; her eyes darted every which way even more frenetically than usual, and there was, especially w h e n she wasn't aware I was watching, a quality of lostness in her face that reminded me what she must have looked like as a little girl.

The overall effect was of a woman w h o was stricken, but the contributing elements of this effect were so subde that a camera might not have captured it on fdm.

W h e n your father came up from the basement (I could hear his tread on the stairs, and fought dread; though seventy-five, he'd always been a vigorous man, and the steps were too slow and heavy), the change wasn't subtle at all. His cotton work clothes sloughed off him in great drooping folds. It had only been six weeks, a period during which I was shocked that it was possible to lose so much weight. All the flesh in his weathered face had

dropped: the lower eyelids sagged to expose a red rim; his cheeks slung loose hke a bloodhound's. I felt guilty, infected by Mary Woolford's consuming conviction that someone must be to blame. T h e n , that was your father's conviction as well. He is not a vengeful person, but a retired electronics machine-toolmaker (too perfect, that he'd made machines that made machines) took matters of corporate responsibility and better business practices with the utmost seriousness. Kevin had proven defective, and I was the manufacturer.

R a t t h n g my fluted teacup in its gilt saucer, I felt clumsy. I asked your father h o w his garden was doing. He looked confused, as if he'd forgotten he had a garden. " T h e blueberry bushes," he remembered mournfully, "are just beginning to bear." T h e word *bear* h u n g in the air. Bushes maybe, but your father had not begun to bear anything.

" A n d the peas?You've always grown such lovely sugar snaps."

He blinked. T h e chimes struck four. He never explained about the peas, and there was a horrible nakedness in our silence.

We had exposed that all those other times I'd asked I hadn't cared about his peas, and that all those other times he'd answered he hadn't cared about telling me.

I lowered my eyes. I apologized for not visiting sooner. They didn't make any noises about that's all right we understand. T h e y didn't make *any* noises, like *say* something, so I just kept talking.

I said that I had wanted to go to all the funerals if I was welcome.Your parents didn't look baffled at the n o n sequitur; we had been effectively talking about *Thursday* f r o m the m o m e n t your mother opened the door. I said that I hadn't wanted to be insensitive, so I rang the parents beforehand; a couple of t h e m had simply h u n g up. Others implored me to stay away; my presence would be *indecent,* said Mary Woolford.

T h e n I told them about Thelma Corbitt—you remember, her son D e n n y was the lanky red-haired boy, the budding thespian—w h o was so gracious that I was abashed. I hazarded to your m o t h e r that tragedy seems to bring out all varieties of unexpected

qualities in people. I said it was as if some folks (I was thinking of Mary) got dunked in plastic, vacuum-sealed like backpacking dinners, and could do nothing but sweat in their private hell. And others seemed to have just the opposite problem, as if disaster had dipped them in acid instead, stripping off the outside layer of skin that once protected t h e m from the slings and arrows of other people's outrageous fortunes. For these sorts, just walking down the street in the wake of every stranger's ill w i n d became an agony, an aching slog through this man's fresh divorce and that woman's terminal throat cancer.They were in hell, too, but it was everybody's hell, this big, shoreless, sloshing sea of toxic waste.

I doubt I put it as fancily as that, but I did say that T h e l m a Corbitt was the kind of w o m a n whose private suffering had b e c o m e a conduit for other people's. A n d I didn't regale your parents with the whole p h o n e call of course, but the full conversation did come flooding back to me:Thelma immediately admiring the "courage" it must have taken for me to pick up the phone, inviting me right away to Denny's funeral, but only if it wasn't too painful for me to go. I allowed to Thelma that it might help me to express my o w n sorrow for her son's passing, and for once I realized that I wasn't simply going through the motions, saying what I was supposed to. Apropos of not much, Thelma explained that D e n n y had been named after the chain restaurant where she and her husband had their first date. I almost stopped her from going on because it seemed easier for me to k n o w as little as possible about her boy, but she clearly believed that we would b o t h be better offif I k n e w just w h o my son had murdered.

She said D e n n y had been rehearsing for the school's spring play, W o o d y Allen's *Don't Drink the Water,* and she'd been helping him with his lines. " H e had us in stitches," she offered. I said that I'd seen h i m in *Streetcar* the

year before and that (stretching the truth) he'd been terrific. She seemed so pleased, if only that her boy wasn't just a statistic to me, a name in the newspaper, or a torture. T h e n she said she wondered whether I didn't have it harder than any of them. I backed off. I said, that couldn't be fair;

after all, at least I still had my son, and the next thing she said impressed me. She said,"Do you? Do you really?" I didn't answer that, but thanked her for her kindness, and then we b o t h got lost in such a tumble of mutual gratitude—an almost impersonal gratitude, that everyone in the world wasn't simply horrid—that we both began to cry.

So, as I told your parents, I went to Denny's funeral. I sat in the back. I wore black, though in funerals these days that is old-fashioned. And then in the receiving line to convey my condolences, I offered Thelma my hand and said, " I ' m so sorry for my loss." That's what I said, a miscue, a gaffe, but I thought it would be worse to correct myself— *"your* loss, I mean." To your parents, I was blithering. They stared.

Finally I took refuge in logistics. T h e legal system is itself a machine, and I could describe its workings, as your father had once explained to me, with poetic lucidity, the workings of a catalytic converter. I said that Kevin had been arraigned and was being held without bail, and I was hopeful that the terminology, so familiar from TV, would comfort; it failed to. (H o w vital, the hard glass interface of that screen .Viewers don't want those shows spilling willy-nilly into their homes, any more than they want other people's sewage to overflow from their toilets.) I said I'd hired the best lawyer I could find—meaning, of course, the most expensive. I thought your father would approve; he himself always bought top-shelf. I was mistaken.

He intruded dully, " W h a t for?"

I had never heard h i m ask that question of anything in his life.

I admired the leap. You and I had always pilloried t h e m behind their backs as being spiritually arid.

" I ' m not sure, though it seemed expected.. .To get Kevin off as lightly as possible, I guess." I frowned.

"Is that what you want?" asked your mother.

" N o . . . W h a t I *want* is to turn back the clock.What I *want* is to never have been b o r n myself, if that's w h a t it took. I can't have what I want."

"But would you like to see him punished?" your father pressed. Mind, he didn't sound wrathful; he hadn't the energy.

I ' m afraid I laughed. Just a dejected *huh!* Still, it wasn't appropriate. " I ' m sorry," I explained. " B u t good luck to them. I tried for the better part of sixteen years to punish Kevin. N o t h i n g I took away mattered to h i m in the first place. What's the N e w York state juvenile justice system going to do? Send h i m to his room? I tried that. He didn't have m u c h use for anything outside his room, or in it; what's the difference? A n d they're hardly going to shame him.You can only subject people to anguish w h o have a conscience. You can only punish people w h o have hopes to frustrate or attachments to sever; w h o w o r r y what you think of them. You can really only punish people w h o are already a litde bit good."

" H e could at least be kept from hurting anyone else," your father submitted.

A defective product is recalled, and withdrawn from the market. I said defiandy, "Well, there is a campaign on, to try him as an adult and give him the death penalty."

" H o w do you feel about that?" asked your mother. G o o d grief, your parents had asked me if A W i n g and a Prayer would ever go public; they

had asked if I thought those steam gadgets pressed trousers as well as ironing. They had never asked what I *felt*.

"Kevin is no adult. B u t will he be any different w h e n he is one?" (They may be technically different specialties, but Workplace Massacre is really just School Shooting Grows Up.)

"Honestly, there are some days," I looked balefully out their bay window, "I wish they w o u l d give h i m the death penalty. Get it all over with. B u t that might be letting myself off the hook."

"Surely you don't blame yourself, my dear!" your mother chimed, though with a nervousness; if I did, she didn't want to hear about it.

"I never *liked* h i m very m u c h , Gladys." I m e t her eyes squarely, m o t h e r - t o - m o t h e r . "I realize it's c o m m o n p l a c e for parents to say to their child sternly,'! love you, but I don't always *like* you.'

But w h a t kind of love is that? It seems to me that comes d o w n to, ' I ' m n o t oblivious to y o u — t h a t is, you can still h u r t my feelings—but I can't stand having you around.' W h o wants to be *loved* like that? Given a choice, I might skip the deep blood tie and settle for being liked. I w o n d e r if I wouldn't have been m o r e moved if my o w n m o t h e r had taken me in her arms and said, 'I *like* you.' I w o n d e r if just enjoying your kid's company isn't m o r e important."

I had embarrassed them. Moreover, I'd d o n e precisely w h a t Harvey had already warned me against. Later they were b o t h deposed, and snippets of this deadly litde speech w o u l d be quoted back verbatim. I don't think y o u r parents had it in for me, but they were honest N e w Englanders, and I'd given t h e m no reason to protect me. I guess I didn't want t h e m to.

W h e n I rustled with leave-taking motions, setting d o w n my stone-cold tea, the two of t h e m looked relieved yet frantic, locking eyes.They must have recognized that these cozy teatime chats of ours w o u l d prove limited in number, and maybe late at night, unable to sleep, they'd think of

questions they might have asked. T h e y were cordial, of course, inviting me to visit any time.Your m o t h e r assured me that, despite everything, they still considered me *part of the family.* T h e i r inclusivity seemed less kind than it might have six weeks before. At that time, the prospect of being enveloped into any *family* had all the appeal of getting stuck in an elevator between floors.

" O n e last thing."Your father touched my arm at the door, and once again asked the kind of question he'd evaded most of his life.

" D o you understand *why?"*

I fear my response will only have helped to cure him of such inquiries, for the answers are often so unsatisfying.

— 1 6 8 —

JANUARY 6 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

T h e Electoral College just certified a Republican president, and you must be pleased. But despite your pose as a sexist, flag-waving retrograde, in fatherhood you were a good little liberal, as fastidious about corporal punishment and nonviolent toys as the times demanded. I ' m not making fun, only wondering if you, too, go back over those precautions and ponder where we went wrong.

My o w n review of Kevin's upbringing was assisted by trained legal minds. "Ms. Khatchadourian," Harvey grilled me on the stand, "did you have a rule in your household that children were not allowed to play with toy guns?"

"For what it's worth, yes."

"And you monitored television and video viewing?"

"We tried to keep Kevin away from anything too violent or sexually explicit, especially w h e n he was little. Unfortunately, that meant my husband couldn't watch most of his o w n favorite programs. And we did have to allow one exception."

" W h a t was that?" Annoyance again; this wasn't planned.

" T h e History Channel." A titter; I was playing to the peanut gallery.

" T h e point is," Harvey continued through his teeth, "you made every effort to ensure that your son was not surrounded by coarsening influences, did you not?"

"In my home," I said. " T h a t is six acres out of a planet. A n d even there, I was unprotected from Kevin's coarsening influence o n me."

Harvey stopped to breathe. I sensed an alternative-medicine professional had taught him some technique. "In other words, you couldn't control what Kevin played with or watched w h e n he went to other children's homes?"

"Frankly, other children rarely asked Kevin over more than once."

T h e judge intervened, "Ms. Khatchadourian, please just answer the question."

" O h , I suppose," I comphed lackadaisically; I was getting bored.

" W h a t about the Internet?" Harvey proceeded."Was your son given free rein to access whatever web sites he liked, including, say, violent or pornographic ones?"

" O h , we did the whole parental-controls schmear, but Kevin cracked it in a day." I flicked the air dismissively. Harvey had warned me against giving the slightest indication that I didn't take the proceedings seriously, and this case did bring out my perverse streak. But my larger trouble was paying

attention. Back at the defense table, my lids would droop, my head list. If only to wake myself up, I added the kind of gratuitous commentary that the judge—a prudish, sharp w o m a n w h o reminded me of Dr.

Rhinestein—had cautioned against.

"You see," I proceeded, "by the time he was eleven or twelve, this was all too late. T h e n o - g u n rules, the computer codes...

Children live in the same world we do. To kid ourselves that we can shelter them from it isn't just naive, it's a vanity. We want to be able to tell ourselves what good parents we are, that we're *doing our best.* If I had it all to do over again, I'd have let Kevin play with whatever he wanted; he liked little enough. A n d I'd have ditched the TV rules, the G-rated videos. T h e y only made us look foohsh. T h e y underscored our powerlessness, and they provoked his contempt."

Although allowed a soliloquy injudicial terms, in my head I'd cut it short. I no longer suffer the constraints of jurisprudential impatience, so allow me to elaborate.

W h a t drew Kevin's contempt was not, as I had seemed to imply, our patent incapacity to protect him from the Big Bad World. N o , to Kevin it was the substance and not the ineffectuality of our taboos that was a joke. Sex? O h , he used it, w h e n he discovered that I was afraid of it, or afraid of it in him, but otherwise? It was a bore. D o n ' t take offense, for you and I did find great pleasure in one another, but sex *is* a bore. Like the Tool Box toys that Kevin spurned as a toddler, the round peg goes in the round hole. T h e secret is that there is no secret. In fact, plain fucking at his high school was so prevalent, and so quotidian, that I doubt it excited h i m much. Alternative round holes furnish a transient novelty whose illusoriness he would have seen right through.

As for violence, the secret is more of a cheap trick.

You remember, once we gave up on the rating system to see a few decent films, watching a video of *Braveheart* as, dare I say it, *a. family?* In the final torture scene, Mel Gibson is stretched on a rack, all four limbs tied to the corners of the compass. Each time his English captors pulled the ropes tauter, the sisal groaned, and so did I . W h e n the executioner thrust his barbed knife into Mel's bowel and ripped upward, I squeezed my palms to my temples and whinnied. But w h e n I peeked through the crook of my arm at Kevin, his glance at the screen was blase. T h e sour half cock of his m o u t h was his customary expression at rest. He wasn't precisely doing the *Times* crossword, but he was absently blacking in all the white squares with a felt-tip.

Cinematic carve-ups are only hard to handle if on some level you beheve that these tortures are being done to you. In fact, it's ironic that these spectacles have such a wicked reputation a m o n g Bible thumpers, since gruesome special effects rely for their impact on their audience's positively Christian compulsion to walk in their neighbors' shoes. But Kevin had discovered the secret: not merely that it wasn't real, but that *it wasn't him.* Over

the years I observed Kevin watching decapitations, disembowelments, dismemberments, flayings, impalements, deoculations, and crucifixions, and I never saw him flinch. Because he'd mastered the trick. If you decline to identify, slice-and-dice is no more discomfiting than watching your m o t h e r prepare beef stroganoff.

So what had we tried to protect h i m from, exacdy? T h e practicalities of violence are rudimentary geometry, its laws those of grammar; like the grade-school definition of a preposition, violence is anything an airplane can do to a cloud. O u r son had a better than average mastery of geometry and grammar both.

There was litde in *Braveheart*—or *Reservoir Dogs,* or *Chucky II*—

that Kevin could not have invented for himself.

In the end, that's what Kevin has never forgiven us. He may not resent that we tried to impose a curtain between himself and the adult terrors lurking behind it. But he does powerfully resent that we led him down the garden path—that we enticed h i m with the prospect of the exotic.

(Hadn't I myself nourished the fantasy that I would eventually land in a country that was somewhere *else?)* W h e n we shrouded our grown-up mysteries for which Kevin was too young, we implicitly promised him that w h e n the time came, the curtain would pull back to reveal—what? Like the ambiguous emotional universe that I imagined awaited me on the other side of childbirth, it's doubtful that Kevin had formed a vivid picture of whatever we had withheld from him. But the one thing he could not have imagined is that we were withholding *nothing.* That there was *nothing* on the other side of our silly rules, *nothing.*

T h e truth is, the vanity of protective parents that I cited to the court goes beyond look-at-us-we're-such-responsible-guardians.

O u r prohibitions also bulwark our self-importance. T h e y fortify the construct that we adults are all initiates. By conceit, we have earned access to an unwritten Talmud whose soul-shattering content we are sworn to conceal from "innocents" for their o w n good. By pandering to this myth of the naif, we service our o w n legend. Presumably we have looked *the horror* in the face, like staring into the naked eye of the sun, blistering into turbulent, corrupted creatures, enigmas even to ourselves. Gross with revelation, we would turn back the clock if we could, but there is no unknowing of this awful canon, no return to the blissfully insipid world of childhood, no choice but to shoulder this weighty black sagacity, whose finest purpose is to shelter our air-headed midgets from a glimpse of the abyss. T h e sacrifice is flatteringly tragic.

T h e last thing we want to admit is that the forbidden fruit on w h i c h we have been gnawing since reaching the magic age of t w e n t y - o n e is the same mealy G o l d e n Delicious that we stuff into o u r children's lunch boxes. T h e last thing we w a n t to admit is that the bickering of the playground perfectly presages the machinations of the boardroom, that o u r

social hierarchies are merely an extension of w h o got picked first for the kickball team, and that grown-ups still get divided into bullies and fatties and crybabies. What's a kid to find out? Presumably we lord over t h e m an exclusive deed to sex, b u t this pretense flies so fantastically in the face of fact that it must result from some conspiratorial group amnesia. To this day, some of my most intense sexual memories date back to before I was ten, as I have confided to you under the sheets in better days. N o , they have sex, too. In truth, we are bigger, greedier versions of the same eating, shitting, rutting ruck, hell-bent on disguising f r o m somebody, if only from a three-year-old, that pretty m u c h all we do is eat and shit and rut. *The secret is there is no secret.* T h a t is w h a t we really wish to keep f r o m our kids, and its suppression is the true collusion of adulthood, the pact we make, the Talmud we protect.

Sure, by the time he was fourteen we had given up on trying to control the videos he watched, the hours he kept, what little he read. But watching those stupid films and logging onto those stupid web sites, swigging that stupid hooch and sucking those stupid butts and flicking those stupid schoolgirls, Kevin must have felt so fiercely cheated. And on *Thursday*? I bet he still felt cheated.

Meantime, I could tell from Harvey's expression of forbearance that he had regarded my mini-lecture as more destructive self-indulgence. O u r case—his case, really—was pearled around the proposition that I had been a normal m o t h e r with normal maternal affections w h o had taken normal precautions to ensure that she raised a normal child. W h e t h e r we were the victims of bad luck or bad genes or bad culture was a matter for shamans or biologists or anthropologists to divine, but not the courts. Harvey was intent on evoking every parent's latent fear that it was possible to do absolutely everything right and still turn on the news to a nightmare from which there is no waking. It was a damned sound approach in retrospect, and n o w that it's been a year or so, I feel a litde sheepish about being so cantankerous at the time.

Still, like that depersonalizing rubber stamp of *postnatal depression*, our there-but-for-the-grace-of-God defense put me right off. I felt driven to distinguish myself from all those normal-normal mommies, if only as an exceptionally c r u m m y one, and even at the potential price tag of $6.5 million (the plaintiffs had researched what W & P was worth). I had already lost everything, Franklin, everything but the company that is, the continuing possession of which, under the circumstances, struck me as crass.

It is true that since then I have sometimes felt wistful about my corporate offspring, n o w fostered by strangers, but at the time I didn't care. I didn't care if I lost the case so long as in the process I was at least kept awake, I didn't care if I lost all my money, and I was positively praying to be forced to sell our eyesore house. I *didn't care about anything.* A n d there's a freedom in apathy, a wild, dizzying liberation on w h i c h you can almost get drunk. You can do anything. Ask Kevin.

As usual, I'd conducted my o w n cross for opposing counsel (they loved me; they'd have liked to call me as a witness for their side), so I was asked to step down. I paused halfway off the stand.

" I ' m sorry, your honor, I just remembered something."

"You wish to amend your testimony, for the record?"

"We did let Kevin have one gun." (Harvey sighed.) "A squirt

gun, w h e n he was four. My husband loved squirt guns as a boy, so we made an exception."

It was an exception to a rule I thought inane to begin with. Keep them away from replicas and kids will aim a stick at you, and I see no developmental distinction between wielding f o r m e d plastic that goes *rat-a-tat-tat* on battery power versus pointing a piece of w o o d and shouting "bang-bang-

bang!" At least Kevin liked his squirt gun, since he discovered that it was annoying.

All through the move from Tribeca, he'd soaked the flies of our movers and then accused them of having "peed their pants."

I thought the accusation pretty rich from a little boy still refusing to pick up on o u r coy hints about learning to "go potty like M o m m e r and D a d d y " some two years after most kids were flushing to beat the band. He was wearing the w o o d e n mask I'd brought him from Kenya, with scraggy, electrified-looking sisal hair, tiny eyeholes surrounded by huge blank whites, and fierce three-inch teeth made from bird bones. E n o r m o u s on his scrawny body, it gave him the appearance of a voodoo doll in diapers. I don't k n o w what I was thinking w h e n I bought it.

That boy hardly needed a mask w h e n his naked face was already impenetrable, and the gift's expression of raw retributive rage gave me the creeps.

Schlepping boxes with a wet, itchy crotch couldn't have been a picnic. They were nice guys, too, uncomplaining and careful, so as soon as I noticed their faces begin to twitch I told Kevin to cut it out. At which point he swiveled his mask in my direction to confirm that I was watching, and water-cannoned the wiry black mover in the butt.

"Kevin, I told you to stop it. Don't squirt these nice m e n w h o are only trying to help us one more time, and *I mean it!'* Naturally I only managed to imply that the first time I hadn't meant it. An intelligent child takes the calculus of this-time-I'm-serious-so-last-time-I-wasn't to its limit and concludes that all his mother's warnings are horseshit.

So we walk through our paces. Squish-squish-squish. *Kevin, stop that this instant.* Squish-squish-squish. *Kevin, I'm not going to tell you again.* And then (squish-squish-squish) the inevitable: *Kevin, if you squirt anybody one*

more time I'm taking the squirt gun away, which earned m e , " N Y E H - n y e h ? Nyeh nyeh nyeh N Y E E -

nyeh-nyeh-nyeh *nyeh* nyeh nyeee, nyeh N Y E - n y e nye N Y E n y e nye-NYEEEEEEE."

Franklin, what good were those parenting books of yours?

N e x t thing I k n o w you're stooping beside our son and borrowing his dratted toy. I hear muffled giggling and something about *Mommer* and then *you* are squirting *me.*

"Franklin, that's not cute. I told him to quit. You're not helping."

" N Y E H - n y e h ? Nye *nyeeh nyeeh.* N y e h *nyeh-nyeh* nyeh *nyeh.*

N y e h *nyeeh nyeeh*- nyeh!" Incredibly, this *nyeh-nyeh* minced from you, after which you shot me between the eyes. Kevin honked (you know, to this day he still hasn't learned h o w to laugh).When you gave the gun back, he drowned my face in a cascade.

I snatched the gun.

"Aw!" you cried. "Eva, moving's such a pain in the behind!"

(Behind, that was the way we talked now.) "Can't we have a litde fun?"

I had the squirt gun now, so one easy exit was to turn a tonal corner: to squirt you gleefully on the nose, and we could have this rambunctious family riot whereby you wrest the gun away and toss the squirt gun to Kevin...And we'd laugh and fall all over each other and we might even remember it years later, that mythic squirt-gun fight the day we moved to Gladstone. And then one of us would return the toy to Kevin and he'd go back to soaking the movers and I wouldn't have a leg to stand on to get h i m to quit because I'd been squirting people too. Alternatively, I could do the killjoy thing, which I did, and put the gun in my purse, which I did.

" T h e movers peed their pants," you told Kevin,"but M o m m e r p o o p e d the party."

Of course I'd heard other parents talk about the unfair g o o d -

c o p / b a d - c o p divide, h o w the good cop was always the kid's favorite while the bad cop did all the heavy lifting and I thought, what a fucking cliche, h o w did this happen to me? I ' m not even *interested* in this stuff.

Kevin's v o o d o o alter ego marked the gun's location in my purse. Most boys would have started to cry. Instead he turned his bird-bone grimace mutely to his mother. From preschool, Kevin was a plotter. He k n e w h o w to bide his time.

Since a child's feelings are bruisable, his privileges few, his chattel paltry even w h e n his parents are well-to-do, I'd been given to understand that punishing one's own child was terribly painful.

Yet in truth, w h e n I commandeered Kevin's squirt gun, I felt a gush of savage joy. As we followed the moving van to Gladstone in the pickup, the continuing possession of Kevin's beloved toy engorged me with such pleasure that I withdrew it from my purse, forefinger on the trigger, riding shotgun. Strapped between us in the front seat, Kevin lifted his gaze from my lap to the dashboard with theatrical unconcern. Kevin's bearing was taciturn, his body slack, but the mask gave him away: Inside he was raging. He hated me with all his being, and I was happy as a clam.

I think he sensed my pleasure and resolved to deprive me of it in the future. He was already intuiting that attachment—if only to a squirt g u n — m a d e h i m vulnerable. Since whatever he wanted was also something I might deny him, the least desire was a liability. As if in tribute to this epiphany, he pitched the mask on the pickup floor, kicked it absently with his tennis shoe, and broke a few teeth. I don't imagine he was such a precocious boy —such a monster—that he had conquered his every earthly appetite by the age of four and a half. He still wanted his squirt gun back. But indifference would ultimately c o m m e n d itself as a devastating weapon.

W h e n we drove up, the house looked even more hideous than I'd remembered, and I wondered h o w I would make it through

the night without starting to cry. I hopped out of the cab. Kevin could n o w unstrap himself, and he scorned assistance. He stood on the running board so that I couldn't shut the door.

"Give me my gun back now." This was no w e a r - M o m - d o w n whine, but an ultimatum. I wouldn't be given a second chance.

"You were a jerk, Kevin," I said breezily, lifting him to the ground by his underarms. " N o toys for jerks." 1 thought, hey, I could c o m e to enjoy being a parent. This is fun.

T h e squirt gun leaked, so I didn't want to stash it back in my purse. As the movers began to unload, Kevin followed me to the kitchen. I hoisted myself onto the counter and slid his squirt gun with my fingertips on top of the cupboards.

I was busy directing what went where and may not have returned to the kitchen for twenty minutes.

" H o l d it right there, mister," I said." *Freeze."*

Kevin had shoved one box next to a pile of two to create a stairway to the counter, onto which one of the movers had slid a box of dishes, making another step. But he had waited for the sound of my footsteps before climbing the cabinet shelves themselves. (In Kevin's book, unwitnessed disobedience is wasteful.) By the time I arrived, his tennis shoes were perched three shelves up. His left hand was gripping the top of the wavering cupboard door, while his right hand hovered two inches from his squirt gun. I needn't have shouted *Freeze!* He was already posing as if for someone to snap a picture.

"Franklin!" I bellowed urgendy. " C o m e here, please! R i g h t away!" I wasn't tall enough to lift h i m to the floor. As I stood below to catch him if he slipped, Kevin and I locked eyes. His pupils stirred with what might have been pride, or glee, or pity.

My God, I thought. He's only four, and he's already winning.

"Hey, there, buster!" You laughed and lifted him down, though not before he'd snatched the gun. Franklin, you had such beautiful arms. "Little young to learn to fly!"

"Kevin's been very, very bad!" I s p u t t e r e d . " N o w we're going to have to take that gun away for a very, very, very long time!"

"Aw, he's earned it, haven't you, kiddo? Man, that climb took guts. Real little monkey, aren't you?"

A shadow crossed his face. He may have thought you were talking down to him, but if so the condescension suited his purposes. "I'm the litde monkey," he said, deadpan. He strode out of the room, squirt gun swinging at his side with the arrogant nonchalance I associated with airplane hijackers.

"You just humiliated me."

"Eva, moving's hard enough on us, but for kids it's traumatic.

Cut him some slack. Listen, I've got some bad news about that rocker of yours..."

For our new home's christening dinner the next night we bought steaks, and I wore my favorite caftan, a white-on-white brocade from Tel Aviv. That same evening Kevin learned to fill his squirt gun with concord grape juice. You thought it was funny.

That house resisted me every bit as much as I resisted it. Nothing fit. There were so few right angles that a simple chest of drawers slid into a corner always left an awkward triangle of unfilled space. My furniture, too, was beat-up, though in the Tribeca loft that battered handmade toy box, the tuneless baby grand, the comfortably slumping couch whose pillows leaked chicken feathers hit just the right offbeat note. Suddenly, in our slick new home the funk turned to junk. I felt sorry for those pieces, much as I'd pity unsophisticated but good-hearted high school buddies from Racine at a party milling with hip, sharp-tongued N e w Yorkers like Eileen and Belmont.

It was the same with the kitchenware: Cluttering sleek green marble counters, my 1940s mixer went from quaint to grungy.

Later, you came home with a bullet-shaped KichenAid, and I took the ancient mixer to the Salvation Army as if at gunpoint. W h e n I unpacked my dented pots and pans, their heavy-gauge aluminum encrusted, their crumbling handles duct-taped together, it looked as if some homeless person had nested in a household whose jet-set tenants were in Rio. The pans went, too; you found a

matching set at Macy s in fashionable red enamel. I'd never n o -

ticed h o w scummy that old cookware had become, though I'd kind of liked not noticing.

In all, I may have been borderline rich, but I'd never owned much, and aside from the silk hangings from Southeast Asia, a few carvings from West Africa, and the Armenian rugs from my uncle, we dispensed with most of the detritus of my old Tribeca life in frighteningly short order. Even the internationalia assumed an inauthentic aura, as if it hailed from an upmarket import outlet.

Since our aesthetic reinvention coincided with my sabbatical from AWAP, I felt as if I were evaporating.

That's why the project in the study was so important to me. I realize that for you that incident epitomizes my intolerance, my rigidity, my refusal to make allowances for children. But that's not what it means to me.

For my study, I chose the one r o o m in that house that didn't have any trees growing through it, had only one skylight, and was *almost* rectangular—no doubt designed near the last, w h e n thankfully our Dream H o m e couple was running out of bright ideas. Most people would consider papering fine w o o d an abomination, but we were swimming in teak, and I had an idea that might make me feel, in one r o o m at least, at home: I would plaster the study with maps. I owned boxes and boxes: city maps of O p o r t o or Barcelona, with all the hostels and pensions I planned to hst in I B E R I W A P circled in red; Geographical Survey maps of the R h o n e Valley with the lazy squiggle of my train j o u r n e y highlighted in yellow; whole continents jagged with ambitious airline itineraries in ruled ballpoint.

As you know, I've always had a passion for maps. I've sometimes supposed that, in the face of an imminent nuclear attack or invading army, the folks with all the power won't be the white supremacists with guns or the M o r m o n s with canned sardines, but the cartographically clued w h o k n o w that this road leads to the mountains. H e n c e the very first thing I do on arrival in a n e w place is locate a map, and that is only w h e n I couldn't get to R a n d McNally in midtown before hopping the plane.

Without one, I feel easily victimized and at sea. As soon I have my map, I gain better command of a town than most of its residents, many of w h o m are totally lost outside a restrictive orbit of the patisserie, charcuterie, and Luisa s house. I've long taken pride in my powers of navigation, for I'm better than the average bear at translating from two dimensions to three, and I've learned to use rivers, railroads, and the sun to find my bearings. (I'm sorry, but what else can I boast about now? I'm getting old, and I look it. I work for a travel agency, and my son is a killer.)

So I associated maps with mastery and may have hoped that, through the literal sense of direction they had always provided, I might figuratively

orient myself in this alien life as a full-time suburban mother. I craved some physical emblem of my earlier self if only to remind me that I had deserted that life by choice and might return to it at will. I nursed some distant hope that as he got older, Kevin might grow curious, point to Majorca in the corner, and ask what it was like there. I was proud of my life, and while I told myself that through an accomplished mother Kevin might find pride in himself, I probably just wanted him to be proud of me. I still had no idea what a tall order for any parent that could turn out to be.

Physically, the project was fiddly. T h e maps were all different sizes, and I had to design a pattern that was not symmetrical or systematic but still made a pleasing patchwork, with a balance of colors and a judicious mix of town centers and continents. I had to learn how to work with wallpaper paste, which was messy, and the older, tattier maps had to be ironed; paper readily browns.With so much else to attend to in a new house and constant hands-on consultation with Louis Role, my new managing editor at AWAP, I was papering my study over the course of several months.

That's what I mean by biding his time. He followed the papering of that study and knew how much trouble it was; he had personally helped to make it more trouble, by tracking wallpaper paste all over the house. He may not have understood the countries the maps signified, but he did understand that they signified something to me.

W h e n I brushed on the last rectangle by the window, a topographical map of Norway stitched with fjords, I climbed d o w n the ladder and surveyed the results with a twirl. It was gorgeous! Dynamic, quirky, lavishly sentimental. Interstitial train ticket stubs, museum floor plans, and hotel receipts gave the collage an additionally personal touch. I had forced one patch of this blank, witless house to mean something. I put on Joe Jackson's *Big World*, lidded the paste, furled the canvas covering my six-foot rolltop desk, rattled it open, and unpacked my last box, arranging my stand of antique cartridge pens and botdes of red and black ink, the Scotch tape, stapler, and tchotchkes for fidgeting—the miniature Swiss cowbell, the terra-cotta penitent from Spain.

Meanwhile I was burbling to Kevin, something all very Virginia Woolf like, "Everyone needs a r o o m of their own. You k n o w h o w you have your

room? Well, this is Mommer's room.

And everyone likes to make their r o o m special. Mommer's been lots of different places, and all these maps remind me of the trips I've taken. You'll see, you may want to make your r o o m special some day, and I'll help you if you w a n t — "

" W h a t do you mean *special"* he said, hugging one elbow. In his drooping free hand drizzled his squirt gun, whose leakage had worsened. Although he was still slight for his age, I'd rarely m e t anyone w h o took up more metaphysical space. A sulking gravity never let you forget he was there, and if he said little, he was always watching.

"So it looks like your personality."

" W h a t personality."

I felt sure I'd explained the word before. I was continually feeding him vocabulary, or w h o was Shakespeare; educational chatter filled the void. I had a feeling he wished I'd shut up.There seemed no end to the information that he did not want.

"Like your squirt gun, that's part of your personality." I

refrained from adding, like the way you ruined my favorite caftan, that's part of your personality. Or the way you're still shitting in diapers coming up on five years old, *that's* part of your personality, too. "Anyway, Kevin, you're being stubborn. I think you k n o w what I mean."

"I have to put j u n k on the walls." He sounded p u t - u p o n .

"Unless you'd rather not."

"I'd *rather not."*

"Great, we've found one more thing you don't want to do," I said. "You don't like to go to the park and you don't like to listen to music and you don't like to eat and you don't like to play with Lego. I bet you couldn't think of one m o r e thing you don't like if you tried."

"All these squiggy squares of paper," he supplied prompdy.

"They're dumb." After Idonlikedat, *dumb* was his favorite word.

"That's the thing about your o w n room, Kevin. It's n o b o d y else's business. I don't care if you think my maps are dumb. I like them." I remember raising an umbrella of defiance: He wouldn't rain on this parade. My study looked terrific, it was all mine, I would sit at my desk and play grown-up, and I could not wait to screw on my crowning touch, a bolt on its door. Yes, I'd commissioned a local carpenter and had added a *door.*

B u t Kevin wouldn't let the matter drop.There was something he wanted to tell me. "I don't get it. It was all gucky.And it took forever. N o w everything looks dumb. W h a t difference does it make. W h y ' d you bother." He stamped his foot. "It's *dumb\"*

Kevin had skipped the *why* phase that usually hits around three, at which point he was barely talking. Although the *why* phase may seem like an insatiable desire to comprehend cause and effect, I'd eavesdropped enough at playgrounds (It's time to go make dinner, cookie! *Why?* Because we're going to get hungry! *Why?* Because our bodies are telling us to eat! *Why?)* to k n o w better. Three-year-olds aren't interested in the chemistry of digestion; they've simply hit on the magic word that always provokes a response. *But Kevin had a real why phase.* He thought

my wallpaper an incomprehensible waste of time, as just about everything adults did also struck him as absurd. It didn't simply perplex him but enraged him, and so far Kevin's *why* phase has proved not a passing developmental stage but a permanent condition.

I knelt. I looked into his stormy, pinched-up face and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Because I love my n e w study. I love the maps. I love them."

I could have been speaking U r d u . "They're dumb," he said stonily. I stood up. I dropped my hand. T h e p h o n e was ringing.

T h e separate line for my study wasn't installed yet, so I left to grab the p h o n e in the kitchen. It was Louis, with another crisis regarding JAPWAP, whose resolution took a fair amount of time. I *did* call to Kevin to come out where I could see him, more than once. But I still had a business to oversee, and have you any notion h o w fatiguing it is to keep an eye on a small child every single m o m e n t of every single day? I ' m tremendously sympathetic with the sort of diligent m o t h e r w h o turns her back for an eye b l i n k — w h o leaves a child in the bath to answer the door and sign for a package, to scurry back only to discover that her httle girl has hit her head on the faucet and drowned in two inches of water. Two inches. Does anyone ever give the w o m a n credit for the twenty-four-hours-minus-three-minutes a day that she has watched that child like a hawk? For the months, the *years'*

worth of don't-put-that-in-your-mouth-sweeties, of whoops!-we-almost-fell-downs? O h , no. We prosecute these people, we call it "criminal parental negligence" and drag t h e m to court through the snot and salty tears of their o w n grief. Because only the three minutes count, those three miserable minutes that were just enough.

I finally got off the phone. D o w n the hall, Kevin had discovered the pleasures of a r o o m with a door: T h e study's was shut. "Hey, kid," I called, turning the knob, " w h e n you're this quiet you make me nervous —"

My wallpaper was spidery with red and black ink. T h e more

absorbent papers had started to blotch.The ceiling, too, since I'd papered that as well; craning on the ladder had been murder on my back. Drips from overhead were staining one of my uncle's most valuable Armenian carpets, our wedding present. T h e r o o m was so whipped and wet that it looked as if a fire alarm had gone off and triggered a sprinkling system, only the nozzles had flung not water but motor oil, cherry Hawaiian punch, and mulberry sorbet.

From the transitional squirts of a sickly purple I might later conclude that he had used up the botde of black India ink first before moving on to the crimson, but Kevin left nothing to my deduction: He was still draining the last of the red ink into the barrel of his squirt gun. Just as he'd posed in the process of retrieving the gun from the top of our kitchen cabinet, he seemed to have saved this last tablespoon for my arrival. He was standing on my study chair, bent in concentration; he did not even look up. T h e filling hole was small, and though he was pouring intently, my burnished oak desk was awash in spatter. His hands were drenched.

"Now," he announced quietly, "it's *special."*

I snatched the gun, flung it on the floor, and stamped it to bits. I was wearing pretty yellow Italian pumps. T h e ink ruined my shoes.

4

JANUARY 1 3 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

Yes, second Saturday of the month, and I ' m debriefing in the Bagel Cafe again. I ' m haunted by the image of that guard with the mud-spatter of facial m oles, w h o looked at me today with his routine mixture of sorrow and distaste. I feel m u c h the same way about his face. T h e moles are large and puffy, like feeding ticks, mottled and gelatinous, widening

toadstool-like from a narrower base so that some of them have started to droop. I've wondered if he obsesses over his lesions, doing overtime at Claverack to save for their removal, or has developed a perverse fondness for them.

People seem able to get used to anything, and it is a short step from adaptation to attachment.

In fact, I read recently that a neural operation has been developed that can virtually cure some Parkinson's patients. So successful is the surgery that it has moved more than one of its beneficiaries to kill themselves. Yes, you read correcdy: to kill themselves. No more trembling, no more spastic arm swings in restaurants that knock over the wine. But also, no more aching sympathy from doe-eyed strangers, no more spontaneous outpourings of tenderness from psychotically forgiving spouses.

T h e recovered get depressed, reclusive.They can't handle it: being just like everybody else.

Between ourselves, I've started to worry that in some backhanded way I've b e c o m e attached to the disfigurement

of my o w n life. These days it is solely through notoriety that I understand w h o I am and what part I play in the dramas of others. I ' m the mother of " o n e of those Columbine kids" (and h o w it grieves Kevin that Littleton has w o n the generic tag over Gladstone). N o t h i n g I do or say will ever outweigh that fact, and it is tempting to stop fighting and give over. That must explain w h y some mothers of my ilk have abandoned any attempt to recoup the lives they led before, as marketing directors or architects, and have gone on the lecture circuit or spearheaded the Million M o m March instead. Perhaps this is what Siobhan meant by being "called."

Indeed, I've developed a healthy respect for fact itself, its awesome dominance over rendition. No interpretation I slather over events in this

appeal to you has a chance of overwhelming the sheer actuality of *Thursday,* and maybe it was the miracle of fact itself that Kevin discovered that afternoon. I can c o m m e n t until I ' m blue, but what happened simply sits there, triumphing like three dimensions over two. No matter h o w m u c h enamel those vandals threw at our windowpanes, the house remained a house, and *Thursday* has the same immutable feel about it, like an object I can paint but whose physical enormity will persist in shape, regardless of hue.

Franklin, I ' m afraid I caught myself *giving over* in the Claverack visitors' waiting r o o m today. A n d by the way, I'd be the last to complain about the facilities overall. N e w l y constructed to supply a burgeoning market sector, the institution is not yet overcrowded.

Its roofs don't leak, its toilets flush; *Juvenile Detention on a Wing and a Prayer* (JUVIEWAP) would give the joint an enthusiastic listing. Claverack's classrooms may provide a better meat-and-potatoes education than trendy suburban high schools whose curricula are padded with courses in Inuit Literature and Sexual Harassment Awareness Training. But aside from the incongruous R o m p e r R o o m primary colors of the visiting area, Claverack is aesthetically harsh—laying bare, once you take away the frippery of life, h o w terrifyingly litde is left. Cinder-block walls a stark

white, the pea-green linoleum unpatterned, the visitors' waiting room is cruelly lacking in distractions—a harmless travel poster for Behze, a single copy of *Glamour*—as if to deliberately quash self-deceit. It is a room that does not wish to be confused with anything so anodyne as an airline ticket-purchasing office or a dental waiting room. That lone poster for AIDS prevention doesn't qualify as decor, but as an accusation.

Today a slight, serene black w o m a n sat next to me, a generation younger but doubdess a mother. I kept shooting fascinated glances at her hair, plaited in a complex spiral that disappeared into infinity at the crown, my admiration fighting a prissy middle-class foreboding about h o w long the

braids went unwashed. H e r restful resignation was characteristic of the black relatives w h o frequent that room; I've made a study of it.

White mothers of delinquents, a statistically rarer breed, tend to jitter, or if they are still, they are ramrod rigid, jaws clenched, heads held stiffly as if fixed in place for a CAT-scan. Should low-enough attendance allow, white moms always assume a chair with at least two empty plastic seats on either side. They often bring newspapers. They discourage conversation. T h e implication is bald: Something has violated the space-time continuum. T h e y do not belong here. I often detect a Mary Woolford brand of outrage, as if these mothers are looking fiercely around the r o o m for someone to sue. Alternatively, I will get a sharp reading of this-cannot-be-happening—an incredulity so belligerent that it can generate a holographic presence in the waiting room of an ongoing parallel universe in which Johnny or Billy came h o m e at the same time he always did after school that day, another ordinary afternoon on which he had his milk and H o - H o s and did his homework. We white folks cling to such an abiding sense of entidement that w h e n things go amiss, we cannot let go of this torturously sunny, idiotically cheerful doppelganger of a world that we deserve in which life is swell.

By contrast, black mothers will sit next to one another, even if the r o o m is practically empty. They may not always talk, but there

is an assumption of fellowship in their proximity, an esprit de corps reminiscent of a b o o k club whose members are all plowing through the same arduously long classic. T h e y never seem angry, or resentful, or surprised to find themselves here. They sit in the same universe in which they've always sat. A n d black people seem to have a m u c h more sophisticated grasp of the nature of events in time. Parallel universes are science fiction, and J o h n n y — o r Jamille—didn't come h o m e that afternoon, did he? E n d of story.

All the same, there's a tacit understanding among the whole of our circle that you do not fish for details about the misconduct that landed your seatmate's young m a n here. Although the transgression in question is in many cases the family's most public manifestation, in that r o o m we collude in the seemly view that the stuff of the *Times* Metro Section, the *Post* front page, is a private affair. O h , a few mothers from time to time will b e n d a neighbor's ear about h o w Tyrone never stole that Discman or he was only holding a kilo for a friend, but then the other mothers catch one another's eyes with bent smiles and pretty soon little Miss We Gonna Appeal This Injustice puts a lid on it. (Kevin informs me that inside, no one claims to be innocent. Instead they confabulate heinous crimes for which they were never caught. "If half these jerk-offs were telling the truth," he slurred wearily last month, "most of the country would be dead." In fact, Kevin has more than once claimed *Thursday* and newbies haven't believed him: " A n d I'm Sidney *Poitier*, dude." Apparently he dragged one such skeptic to the library by the hair to confirm his credentials in an old copy of *Newsweek.)*

So I was struck by this young woman's repose. R a t h e r than clean her nails or cull old receipts from her pocketbook, she sat upright, hands at rest in her lap. She stared straight ahead, reading the AIDS awareness poster for perhaps the hundredth time. I hope this doesn't sound racist— these days I never k n o w what will give offense—but black people seem terribly g o o d at waiting, as if they inherited the gene for patience along with the one for sickle-cell. I noticed that in Africa as well: dozens of Africans sitting or standing by the side of the road, waiting for the bus or, even harder, waiting for nothing in particular, and they never appeared restive or annoyed. They didn't pull grass and chew the tender ends with their front teeth; they didn't draw aimless pictures with the toes of their plastic sandals in the dry red clay. They were still, and present. T h e capacity is existential, that ability to just be, with a profundity that I have seen elude some very well educated people.

At one point she crossed to the candy machine in the corner.

The exact-change light must have been on, because she returned and asked if I had change of a dollar. I fell over myself checking every coat pocket, every cranny of my purse, so that by the time I scrounged the coins together she may have wished she'd never asked. I contend with strangers so infrequently now—I still prefer booking flights in the back room at Travel R Us—that during small transactions I panic. Maybe I was desperate to have a positive effect on someone else's life, if only by providing the means to a Mars Bar. At least this awkward exchange broke the ice, and, to pay me back for what I made seem so much trouble, she spoke when she resumed her seat.

"I ought to bring him fruit, I guess." She glanced apologetically at the M&M's in her lap. "But Lord, you know he'd never eat it."

We shared a sympathetic look, mutually marveling that kids w h o commit grown-up crimes still have their litde-boy sweet tooth.

" M y son claims Claverack food is 'hog slop,'" I volunteered.

" O h , my Marlon do nothing but complain, too. Say it ain't 'fit for human consumption.'And you hear they bake saltpeter in the bread rolls?" (This rusty summer-camp rumor is surely sourced in adolescent vanity: that a teenager's lavish libidinous urges are so seditious as to demand dampening by underhanded means.)

"No, 'hog slop' was all I could get out of him," I said. "But Kevin's never been interested in food. W h e n he was little I was afraid he would starve, until I figured out that he would eat as long as I wasn't watching. He didn't like to be seen needing it—as if hunger were a sign of weakness. So I'd leave a sandwich where he was sure to find it, and walk away. It was like feeding a dog. From around the corner I'd see him cram it in his mouth in two or three bites, looking around, making sure nobody saw. He caught me peeking once, and spat it out. He took the half-chewed bread and cheddar and mashed it onto the plate glass door. It stuck. I left it there for the longest time. I'm not sure why."

My companion's eyes, previously alert, had filmed. She had no reason to be interested in my son's dietary proclivities and now looked as if she regretted having started a conversation. I'm sorry, Franklin—it's just that I go for days barely speaking, and then if I do start to talk it spews in a stream, like vomit.

"At any rate," I continued with a bit more calculation, "I've warned Kevin that once he's transferred to an adult facility the food is bound to be far worse."

T h e woman's eyes narrowed. "Your boy don't get out at eighteen? Ain't that a shame." Skirting the waiting room's taboo subject, she meant: He must have done something bad.

" N e w York is pretty lenient with juveniles under sixteen," I said. "But even in this state, kids have to do a five-year minimum for murder—especially when it's seven high school students and an English teacher." I added as her face rearranged, " O h , and a cafeteria worker. Maybe Kevin has stronger feelings about food than I thought."

She whispered, *"KK!'*

I could hear the reels in her head rewinding, as she grasped frantically after everything I'd said to which she'd only half listened. *Now* she had reason to be interested in my son's secretive appetite—and in his "musical" preference for tuneless cacophony randomly generated by computer, in the ingenious little game he used to play composing school essays entirely with three-letter words.What I had just done, it was a kind of party trick. Suddenly she was at a loss for what to say, not because I bored her, but because she was bashful. If she could scavenge a hasty bushel of

bruised and mealy details from my conversational drop-fruit, she would present it to her sister over the phone the next day like a Christmas basket.

" N o n e other," I said. "Funny how 'KK' used to mean 'Krispy Kreme.'"

"That must b e . . . " She faltered. I was reminded of the time I got a free upgrade to first class, where I sat right next to Sean Connery. Tongue-tied, I couldn't think of a thing to say besides,

"You're Sean Connery," of which presumably he was aware.

"That must be a m-mighty cross to bear," she stammered.

"Yes," I said. I was no longer driven to get her attention; I had it. I could control the upchuck of chatter that had embarrassed me minutes before. I experienced a seated sensation, literalized in an improbable physical comfort in my form-fitted orange chair.

Any obligation to express interest in the plight of this young woman's own son seemed to vanish. N o w I was the serene party, and the one to be courted. I felt almost queenly.

"Your boy," she scrambled. " H e holding up okay?"

" O h , Kevin loves it here."

" H o w come? Marlon curse this place up one side, down the other."

"Kevin has few interests," I said, giving our son the benefit of the doubt that he had any. "He's never known what to do with himself. After-school hours and weekends hung off him in big drooping folds like an oversized car coat. Bingo, his day is agreeably regimented from breakfast to lights-out. And now he lives in a world where being pissed off all day long is totally normal. I think he even feels a sense of community," I allowed. "Maybe not with the other inmates themselves. But their prevailing humors—disgust, hostility, derision—are like old friends."

Other visitors were clearly eavesdropping, since they flicked averted eyes at our chairs with the swift, voracious motion of a lizard's tongue. I might have lowered my voice, but I was enjoying the audience.

" H e look back on what he done, he feel any, you k n o w — "

" R e m o r s e ? " I provided dryly. " W h a t could he conceivably regret? N o w he's *somebody,* isn't he? A n d he's *found himself,* as they said in my day. N o w he doesn't have to w o r r y about w h e t h e r he's a freak or a geek, a grind or a j o c k or a nerd. He doesn't have to w o r r y if he's gay. He's a murderer. It's marvelously unambiguous.

A n d best of all," I took a breath, "he got away from me."

"Sounds like there's a silver lining, then." She held herself at an inch or two greater distance than w o m e n in earnest conversation are wont, eyeing me at an angle that departed from a straight line by about thirty degrees.These subde removals seemed almost scientific: I was a specimen. "Like, you get away from him, too."

I gestured helplessly at the waiting room. " N o t quite."

Glancing at her Swatch, she displayed a growing awareness that in what could prove a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, she had to w o r k in the one question she had always wanted to ask *KICs* actual mother before it was too late. I k n e w w h a t was coming: "You ever figure what it was drove him to—you ever figure out *why?"*

It's w h a t they all want to ask—my brother, your parents, my coworkers, the d o c u m e n t a r y makers, Kevin's psychiatric consult, the gladstone_carnage.com web-page designers, t h o u g h interestingly never my o w n mother. After I steeled myself to accept T h e l m a Corbitt's gracious invitation for coffee the week after her son's funeral (though she never asked aloud, and she spent most of our session reading me his poems and showing me w h a t seemed like hundreds of snapshots of D e n n y in school plays), it came off her in pulses, it clutched at my dress: a craving for comprehension that verged on hysteria. Like all those parents, she'd been wracked by the apprehension that the entire gory mess w h o s e sticky pieces we would b o t h be picking up for the rest of o u r lives was *unnecessary.* Quite. *Thursday* was an elective, hke printmaking, or Spanish. B u t this incessant badgering, this pleading refrain of *why, why, why*—it's so grossly unfair. Why, after all I have borne, am I held accountable for

ordering their chaos? Isn't it e n o u g h that I suffer the b r u n t of the facts w i t h o u t shouldering this unreasonable responsibility for w h a t they mean? That young w o m a n at Claverack meant no h a r m I ' m sure, but her all-too-familiar question m a d e me bitter.

"I expect it's my fault," I said defiantly. "I wasn't a very good mother—cold, judgmental, selfish.Though you can't say I haven't paid the price."

"Well, then," she drawled, closing up that two inches and swiveling her gaze thirty degrees to look me in the eye. "You can blame your mother, and she can blame hers. Leastways sooner or later it's the fault of somebody who's dead."

Stolid in my guilt, clutching it like a girl with a stuffed bunny, I failed to follow.

"Greenleaf?" shouted the guard. My companion tucked the candy into her pocketbook, then rose. I could see her calculating that she had just enough time to slip in one more quick question-and-answer or to deliver a parting thought. W i t h Sean Connery, that's always the quandary, isn't it: to siphon information, or to pour. S o m e h o w it impressed me that she chose the latter.

"It's always the mother's fault, ain't it?" she said softly, collecting her coat. "That boy turn out bad cause his mama a drunk, or a she a junkie. She let him r u n wild, she don't teach h i m right from wrong. She never h o m e w h e n he back from school. N o b o d y ever say his daddy a drunk, or his daddy not h o m e after school.

A n d n o b o d y ever say they some kids just damned mean. Don't you believe that old guff. D o n ' t you let t h e m saddle you with all that killing."

"Loretta Greenleaf!"

"It hard to be a m o m m a . N o b o d y ever pass a law say 'fore you get pregnant you gotta be perfect. I ' m sure you try the best you could.You here, in this dump, on a nice Saturday afternoon? You still trying. N o w

you take care of yourself, honey. A n d you don't be talking any more a that nonsense."

Loretta Greenleaf held my hand and squeezed it. My eyes

sprang hot. I squeezed her hand back, so hard and so long that she must have feared I might never let go.

O h , dear, the coffee is cold.

A

(9 P.M.)

N o w returned to my duplex, I ' m ashamed of myself. I needn't have identified myself as Kevin's mother. Loretta Greenleaf and I might have simply talked about the Claverack food service: *Who says saltpeter suppresses sex drive*? or even, *What the hell is "saltpeter,"*

anyway?

I was about to write, "I don't k n o w what got into me," but I ' m afraid I do, Franklin. I was thirsty for companionship, and I felt her engagement with this garrulous white lady waning. I had the power to rivet her if I wished, and I reached for it.

Of course, in the immediate aftermath of *Thursday* I wanted n o t h i n g m o r e than to crawl d o w n a sewage drain and pull the lid. I longed for unobtrusiveness, like my brother, or oblivion, if that is not simply a synonym for wishing you were dead. T h e last thing in the world I was worried about was my sense of distinction. B u t the resilience of the spirit is appalling. As I said, I get h u n g r y now, and for more than chicken. W h a t I wouldn't give to go back to the days that I sat beside strangers and made a memorable impression because I had f o u n d e d a successful company or had traveled extensively in Laos. I wax nostalgic for the time that Siobhan clapped her hands and exclaimed admiringly that she'd used *A Wing and a Prayer* on her trips to the C o n t i n e n t . T h a t is the eminence that I chose for myself. But we are all resourceful, and we use w h a t falls to hand. Stripped of company, wealth, and handsome husband, I stoop to my one surefire shortcut to being *somebody.*

M o t h e r of the ignoble Kevin Khatchadourian is w h o I am now, an identity that amounts to one more of our son's little victories.

AWAP and our marriage have been demoted to footnotes, only

interesting insofar as they illuminate my role as the mother of the kid everybody loves to hate. On the most private level, this fdial mugging of w h o I once was to myself may be what I most resent. For the first half of my life, I was my own creation. From a dour, closeted childhood, I had molded a vibrant, expansive adult w h o commanded a smattering of a dozen languages and could pioneer through the unfamiliar streets of any foreign town.

This notion that you are your own work of art is an American one, as you would hasten to point out. N o w my perspective is European: I am a bundle of other people's histories, a creature of circumstance. It is Kevin w h o has taken on this aggressive, optimistic Yankee task of making himself up.

I may be h o u n d e d by that *why* question, but I wonder h o w hard I've really tried to answer it. I ' m not sure that I want to understand Kevin, to find a well within myself so inky that from its depths what he did makes sense. Yet little by little, led kicking and screaming, I grasp the rationality of *Thursday.* Mark David Chapman n o w gets the fan mail that J o h n L e n n o n can't; Richard Ramirez, the " N i g h t Stalker," may have destroyed a dozen women's chances for connubial happiness but still receives numerous offers of marriage in prison himself. In a country that doesn't discriminate between fame and infamy, the latter presents itself as plainly more achievable. H e n c e I am no longer amazed by the frequency of public rampages with loaded automatics but by the fact that every ambitious citizen in America is not atop a shopping center looped with refills of ammunition. W h a t Kevin did *Thursday* and what I did in Claverack's waiting r o o m today depart only in scale.Yearning to feel *special*, I was determined to capture someone's attention, even if I had to use the murder of nine people to get it.

It's no mystery why Kevin is at h o m e at Claverack. If in high school he was disaffected, he had too m u c h competition; scores of other boys battled for the role of surly p u n k slumped in the back of the class. N o w he has carved himself a niche.

And he has colleagues, in Litdeton,Jonesboro, Springfield. As

in most disciplines, rivalry vies with a more collegia! sense of c o m m o n purpose. Like many a luminary, he is severe with his contemporaries, calling t h e m to rigorous standards: He derides blubberers Hke Paducah's Michael Carneal w h o recant, w h o sully the purity of their gesture with a craven regret. He admires style—for instance, Evan Ramsey's crack as he took aim at his math class in Bethyl, Alaska, "This sure beats algebra, doesn't it?"

He appreciates capable planning: Carneal inserted gun-range earplugs before aiming his .22 Luger; Barry Loukaitis in Moses Lake had his mother take h i m shopping in seven different stores until he found just the right long black coat under which to hide his .30-caliber hunting rifle. Kevin has a refined sense of irony, too, treasuring the fact that the teacher Loukaitis shot had only recently written on the report card of this A-student,"A pleasure to have in the class." Like any professional, he has contempt for the kind of rank incompetence featured by J o h n Sirola, the fourteen-year-old in Redlands, California, w h o blasted his principal in the face in 1995, only to trip w h e n fleeing the scene and shoot himself dead. And in the way of most established experts, Kevin is suspicious of parvenus trying to elbow their way into his specialty with the slightest of qualifications—witness his resentment of that thirteen-year-old eviscerater. He is difficult to impress.

M u c h as J o h n U p d i k e dismisses T o m Wolfe as a hack, Kevin reserves a particular disdain for Luke W o o d h a m , "the cracker"

from Pearl, Mississippi. He approves of ideological focus but scorns p o m p o u s moralizing, as well as any School Shooting aspirant w h o can't keep his o w n counsel— and apparently before taking out his nominal once-girlfriend with a .30-.30 caliber shotgun, W o o d h a m couldn't stop himself f r o m passing a note to a friend in class that read (and you should hear your son's puling rendition):"I killed because people like me are mistreated every day. I did this to show society push us and we will push back."

Kevin decried W o o d h a m s sniveling while mucus drizzled onto his orange jumpsuit on *Prime Time Live* as *totally uncool:* " I ' m my o w n person! I ' m n o t a tyrant. I ' m n o t evil and I have a heart

and I have feelings!"Woodham has admitted to warming up by clubbing his dog, Sparky, wrapping the pooch in a plastic bag, torching him with lighter fluid, and listening to him whimper before tossing him in a pond, and after studious consideration Kevin has concluded that animal torture is cliched. Lastly, he is especially condemnatory of the way this whiny creature tried to w o r m out of responsibility by blaming a satanic cult. T h e story itself showed panache, but Kevin regards a refusal to stand by one's own handiwork as not only undignified but as a betrayal of the tribe.

I know you, my dear, and you're impatient. Never mind the preliminaries, you want to hear about the visit itself—what his mood's like, how he's looking, what he said. All right, then. But by imputation, you asked for it.

He looks well enough. Though there is still a tinge too much blue in his complexion, fine veins at his temples convey a promising hint of vulnerability. If he has hacked his hair in uneven shocks, I take that as representation of healthy concern with his appearance. T h e perpetual half cock on the right corner of his mouth is starting to carve a permanent single quote into the cheek, remaining behind when he switches to a pursed-mouth scowl. There's no close quote on the left, and the asymmetry is disconcerting.

No more of those ubiquitous orange jumpsuits these days at Claverack. So Kevin is free to persist in the perplexing style of dress he developed at fourteen, arguably crafted in counterpoint to the prevailing fashion in clothing that's oversized—the jib of Harlem toughs, boxers catching sun, sauntering through moving traffic as the waistband of jeans that could rig a small sailboat shimmy toward their knees. But if Kevin's alternative look is pointed, I can only make wild guesses at what it means.

W h e n he first trotted out this fashion in eighth grade, I assumed that the T-shirts biting into his armpits and pleating across his chest were old favorites he was reluctant to let go, and I went out of my way to find duplicates in a larger size. He never

touched them. N o w I understand that the dungarees whose zipper would not quite close were carefully selected. Likewise the windbreakers whose arms rode up the wrist, the ties that dangled three inches above the belt for when we forced him to look "nice," the shirts that gaped between popping buttons.

1 will say, the tiny-clothes thing did get a lot across. At first glance, he looked poverty-stricken, and I stopped myself more than once from commenting that "people will think" we don't earn enough to buy our growing boy n e w jeans; adolescents are so greedy for signals that their parents are consumed with social status. Besides, a closer inspection revealed that his shrunken getup was designer labeled, lending the pretense at hard luck a parodic wink. T h e suggestion of a wash load churned at an errantly high temperature connoted a comic ineptitude, and the binding of a child-sized jacket across the shoulders would sometimes pull his arms goofily out from his sides like a baboon's. (That's as close as he's come to fitting the mold of a conventional cutup; no one I've spoken to about our son has ever mentioned finding him funny.) T h e way the hems of his jeans stopped shy of his socks made a hayseedy impression, consonant with his fondness for playing dumb. There was more than a suggestion of Peter Pan about the style—a refusal to grow u p — t h o u g h I'm confused why he would cling so to being a kid w h e n throughout his childhood he seemed so lost in it, knocking around in those years much the way I was rattling around our enormous house.

Claverack's experimental policy of allowing inmates to wear street clothes has allowed Kevin to reiterate his fashion statement inside. While N e w York's corner boys flapping in outsized gear look like toddlers from a distance, Kevin's shrunken mode of dress has the opposite effect of making

him look bigger—more adult, bursting. O n e of his psych consultants has accused me of finding the style unnerving for its aggressive sexuality: Kevin's crotch cuts revealingly into his testicles, and the painted-on T-shirts make his nipples protrude. Perhaps; certainly the tight sleeve hems, the taut

collars, and the yanked-in waistbands strap his body in cords and remind me of bondage.

He looks uncomfortable, and in this respect the garb is apt.

Kevin *is* uncomfortable; the tiny clothing replicates the same constriction that he feels in his own skin. Reading his suffocating attire as equivalent to a penitential hair shirt might seem a stretch, but the waistbands chafe, the collars score his neck. Discomfort begets discomfort in others, of course, and that, too, must be part of the plan. I often find that w h e n I'm with him I pull at my own clothes, discreetly prizing a seam from between my buttocks or releasing an extra button on my blouse.

Eyeing laconic interchanges at adjoining tables, I've detected that some of his fellow inmates have started to mimic Kevin's eccentric dress sense. I gather that T-shirts in unusually small sizes have become prized possessions, and Kevin himself has mentioned smugly that runts are being robbed of their clothes.

He may hold imitators up to ridicule, but he does seem gratified at having initiated his very own fad. Were he commensurately concerned with originality two years ago, the seven students he used for target practice would be preparing applications to the college of their choice by now.

Anyway, today? He lounged into the visiting room wearing what must have been one of the runts' sweatpants, since I didn't recognize them as ones I'd bought. T h e little plaid button-down he wore on top was only secured by the middle two buttons, exposing his midriff. N o w even his tennis shoes are too small, and he crushes their heels under his feet. He might not like to

hear me say it, but he's graceful. There's a languor to his motions, as to the way he talks. And he always has that skew, too; he walks sideways, like a crab. Leading with his left hip gives him the subtle sidle of a supermodel on a catwalk. If he realized I saw traces of effeminacy in him, I doubt he'd be offended. He prizes ambiguity; he loves to keep you guessing.

"What a surprise," he said smoothly, pulling out the chair; its back legs had lost their plastic feet and the raw aluminum shrieked across the cement, a fingernail-on-the-blackboard sound that Kevin drew out. He slid his elbow across the table, resting his temple on his fist, assuming that characteristic tilt, sardonic with his whole body. I've tried to stop myself, but whenever he sits in front of me I rear back.

I do get irked that I ' m always the one w h o has to come up with something to talk about. He's old enough to carry a conversation. And since he has imprisoned me in my life every bit as m u c h as he's imprisoned himself in his, we suffer an equal poverty of fresh subject matter. O f t e n we run through the same script: " H o w are you?" I ask with brutal simplicity. "You want me to say *fine*?" "I want you to say something," I throw back.

"You're the one came to see me," he reminds me. A n d he can and will sit it out, the whole hour. As for w h i c h of us has the greater tolerance for nullity, there's no contest. He used to spend whole Saturdays propped theatrically in front of the Weather Channel.

So today I skipped even a perfunctory *how's tricks*, on the theory that folks w h o shun small talk are still dependent on its easing transitions but have learned to make other people do all the work. And I was still agitated by my exchange with Loretta Greenleaf. Maybe having tempted his o w n mother into boasting about her connection to his filthy atrocity would afford him some satisfaction. But apparently my messianic impulse to take responsibility for *Thursday* onto myself reads to Kevin as a f o r m of stealing.

"All right," I said, no-nonsense. "I need to know. Do you blame me? It's all right to say so, if that's what you think. Is that what you tell your psych consults, or they tell you? It all traces back to your mother."

He snapped," *Why should you get all the credit?"*

T h e conversation that I had expected to consume our whole h o u r was n o w over in ninety seconds. We sat.

" D o you remember your early childhood very well, Kevin?"

I had read somewhere that people with painful childhoods will often draw a blank.

"What's to remember?"

"Well, for example you wore diapers until you were six."

" W h a t about it." If I had some idea of embarrassing him, I was misguided.

"It must have been unpleasant."

" F o r you."

"For you as well."

" W h y ? " he asked mildly. "It was warm."

" N o t for long."

"Didn't sit in it for long.You were a good mumsey."

"Didn't other kindergartners make f u n of you? I worried at the time."

" O h , I bet you couldn't sleep."

"I worried," I said staunchly.

He shrugged with one shoulder. " W h y should they? I was getting away with something and they weren't."

"I was just wondering if, at this late date, you could shed some light on why the delay. Your father gave enough demonstrations."

"Kevvy-wevvy!" he cooed, falsetto. *"Honey sweetie! Look at Daddy kins! See how he pee-pees in the pooper-dooper? Wouldn't you like that, too, Kevvy-woopsie? Wouldn't it he fun to be just like Dadda-boo, piddle your peenie-weenie over the toileywoiley?* I was just hoisting you on your o w n retard."

I was interested that he had allowed himself to be verbally clever; he's generally careful not to let on that he's got a brain. "All right," I said. "You wouldn't use the toilet for yourself, and you and I—you wouldn't do it for me. But why not for your father?"

"You're a big boy, now!" Kevin minced. *"You're my big boy!You're my little man!* Christ.What an asshole."

I stood up. " D o n ' t you *ever say that.* D o n ' t you *ever, ever say that.*

N o t once, not ever, not one more time!"

" O r what," he said softly, eyes dancing.

I sat back down. I shouldn't let h i m get to me like that. I usually don't. Still any dig at you—.

O h , maybe I should count myself lucky that he doesn't press this button more often. Then, lately he is always pressing it, in a way.That is, for most of his childhood his narrow, angular features taunted me with my own reflection. But in the last year his face has started to fill out, and as it widens I begin to recognize your broader bones. While it's true that I once searched Kevin's face hungrily for resemblance to his father, n o w I keep

fighting this nutty impression that he's doing it on purpose, to make me suffer.

I don't want to see the resemblance. I don't want to spot the same mannerisms, that signature downward flap of a hand when you dismissed something as insignificant, like the trifling matter of neighbor after neighbor refusing to let their kids play with your son. Seeing your strong chin wrenched in a pugnacious jut, your wide artless smile bent to a crafty grin, is like beholding my husband possessed.

"So what would you have done?" I said. "With a little boy w h o insisted on messing his pants until he was old enough for first grade?"

Kevin leaned further onto his elbow, his bicep flat on the table."Know what they do with cats, don't you.They do it in the house, and you shove their faces into their own shit. They don't like it. They use the box." He sat back, satisfied.

"That's not that far from what I did, is it?" I said heavily. " D o you remember? What you drove me to? H o w I finally got you to use the bathroom?"

He traced a faint white scar on his forearm near the elbow with a note of tender possessiveness, as if stroking a pet worm.

"Sure." There was a different quality to this affirmation; I felt he truly remembered, whereas these other recollections were post hoc.

"I was proud of you," he purred.

"You were proud of yourself," I said. "As usual."

"Hey," he said, leaning forward. "Most honest thing you ever done."

I stirred, collecting my bag. I may have craved his admiration once, but not for that; for anything but that.

" H o l d on," he said. "I answered your question. Got one for you."

This was new. "All right," I said. "Shoot."

"Those maps," he said.

" W h a t about them," I said.

"Why'd you keep them on the walls?"

It's only because I refused to tear those spattered maps from the study for years, or to allow you to paint over them as you were so anxious to, that Kevin "remembers" the incident at all.

He was, as you observed repeatedly at the time, awfully young.

"I kept them up for my sanity," I said. "I needed to see something you'd done to me, to reach out and touch it. To prove that your malice wasn't all in my head."

"Yeah," he said, tickling the scar on his arm again. " K n o w what you mean."

I promise to explain, Franklin, but right n o w I just can't.

JANUARY 1 7 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

I ' m sorry to have left you dangling, and I've been dreading an explanation ever since. In fact, driving to work this morning, I had another trial flashback. Technically, I committed peijury.

I just didn't think I owed that beady-eyed j u d g e (a congenital disorder I'd never seen before, inordinately small pupils, provided her the dazed,

insensate look of a cartoon character who's just been hit over the head with a frying pan) what for a decade I'd kept from my o w n husband.

"Ms. Khatchadourian, did you or your husband ever hit your son?" Mary's attorney leaned threateningly into the witness stand.

"Violence only teaches a child that physical force is an acceptable m e t h o d of getting your way," I recited.

" T h e court can only agree, Ms. Khatchadourian, but it's very important that we clarify in no uncertain terms for the record: D i d you or your husband ever physically abuse Kevin while he was in your care?"

"Certainly not," I said firmly, and then muttered again for good measure, "certainly not." I rued the repetition. There's something dodgy about any assertion one feels obliged to make twice.

As I left the stand, my foot caught on a floorboard nail, pulling

the black rubber heel off my pump. I limped back to my chair, reflecting, better a broken shoe than a long w o o d e n nose.

But keeping secrets is a discipline. I never used to think of myself as a good liar, but after having had some practice I had adopted the prevaricator's credo that one doesn't so m u c h fabricate a lie as marry it. A successful lie cannot be brought into this world and capriciously abandoned; like any committed relationship, it must be maintained, and with far more devotion than the truth, which carries on being carelessly true without any help. By contrast, my lie needed me as m u c h as I needed it, and so demanded the constancy of wedlock: Till death do us part.

I realize that Kevin's diapers embarrassed you, even if they confoundingly failed to embarrass the boy himself. We were already using the extra-large; much longer and we'd have to start mail-ordering the kind for medical

incontinence. However many tolerant parenting manuals you'd devoured, you fostered an old-fashioned masculinity that I found surprisingly attractive. You didn't want your son to be a sissy, to present an easy target for teasing peers, or to cling to a talisman of infancy quite so publicly glaring, since the bulge under his pants was unmistakable. "Jesus,"

you'd grumble once Kevin was in b e d , " w h y couldn't he just suck his t h u m b ? "

Yet you yourself had engaged in an ongoing childhood battle with your fastidious mother over flushing, because the toilet had overflowed once, and every time you pushed the handle thereafter you were terrified that lumps of excrement might begin disgorging endlessly onto the bathroom floor, like a scatological version of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice.* A n d I had agreed that it was tragic h o w kids can tie themselves into neurotic knots over pee and poop, and w h a t a waste of angst it all was, so I went along with this n e w theory about letting toddlers choose to potty train w h e n they were "ready." Nevertheless, we were b o t h getting desperate.

You started drilling me about whether he saw me using the toilet during the day (we weren't sure if he should or shouldn't) or

whether I might have said anything to frighten h i m away from this throne of civilized life, in comparison to which amenities like *please* and *thank you* were dispensable as doilies. You accused me by turns of making too much of the matter, and too litde.

It was impossible that I made too little of it, since this one developmental stage that our son seemed to have skipped was tyrannizing my life. You will recall that it was only thanks to the n e w educational ethos of pathological neutrality (there s-no-such-thing-as-worse-or-better-but-only-different) as well as paralytic fear of suit (in horror of w h i c h Americans are increasingly reluctant to do anything from giving drowning victims m o u t h -

t o - m o u t h to firing slack-jawed incompetents from their employ) that Kevin wasn't turned away from that pricey Nyack kindergarten until he, well, got his shit together. All the same, the teacher was not about to change a five-year-old boy, claiming that she'd be laying herself open to charges of sexual abuse. (In fact, w h e n I quietly informed Carol Fabricant of Kevin's little eccentricity, she looked at me askance and announced witheringly that this kind of *nonconforming behavior was* sometimes a *cry for help.* She didn't spell it out, but for the next week I lived in fear of a knock on the door and a flashing blue light in our windows.) So no sooner had I dropped him off at Love-'n'-Learn at 9 A.M. and driven back h o m e than I was obliged to return around 11:30 A.M. with my n o w rather careworn diaper bag.

If he was dry, I'd engage in a bit of pretextual hair tousling and ask to see what he was drawing, t h o u g h with enough of his

"artwork" stuck on the fridge, I'd already have a pretty good idea. (While the other children had graduated to fat-headed stick figures and landscapes with a litde strip of blue sky at the top, Kevin was still scrawling formless, jagged scrabble in black and purple crayon.) Yet all too often a midday reprieve meant return to a ringing phone: Miss Fabricant, informing me that Kevin was n o w drenched and the other kids were complaining because he smelled. Would I please—? I could hardly say no. Thus after picking h i m up at 2 P.M., I'd have made four trips to Love-'n'-

Learn in a day. So m u c h for having plenty of time to myself once Kevin started school, as well as for the fantasy I had improbably kept alive that I might soon be able to resume the directorship ofAWAP.

Were Kevin a pliant, eager boy w h o happened to have this one unpleasant problem, she might have felt sorry for him. But Miss Fabricant's relationship with our son was not thriving for other reasons.

We may have made a mistake in sending him to a Montessori kindergarten, whose philosophy of h u m a n nature was, at the least, optimistic. Its supervised but unstructured education—kids were placed in a "stimulating" environment, with play stations including alphabet blocks, counting beads, and pea plants—presumed that children were inborn autodidacts. Yet in my experience, w h e n left to their o w n devices people will get up to one of two things: nothing much, and no good.

An initial report of Kevin's "progress" that N o v e m b e r mentioned that he was "somewhat undersocialized" and "may need assistance with initiating behaviors." Miss Fabricant was loath to criticize her charges, so it was pulling teeth to get her to translate that Kevin had spent his first two months sitting slack on a stool in the middle of the room, gazing dully at his puttering classmates. I knew that look, a precociously geriatric, glaucous-eyed glare sparked only by a sporadic glint of scornful incredulity.

W h e n pressed to play with the other boys and girls, he rephed that whatever they were doing was "dumb," speaking with the effortful weariness that in junior high school would convince his history teacher that he was drunk. However she persuaded him to craft those dark, furious drawings I will never know.

For me, these crayon mangles were a constant strain to admire.

I rapidly ran out of compliments *(That has so much energy, Kevin!)* and imaginative interpretations *(Is that a storm, honey? Or maybe a picture of the hair and soap we pull out of a bathtub drain!).* Hard-pressed to keep cooing over his exciting choice of colors w h e n he drew exclusively in black, brown, and violet, I couldn't help

but suggest timidly that abstract expressionism having hit such a dead-end in the fifties, maybe he should try approximating a bird or a tree. B u t for Miss Fabricant, Kevin's clogged-drain still lifes were proof positive that the Montessori m e t h o d could work wonders with a doorstop.

Nonetheless, even Kevin, w h o has such a gift for it, can sustain stasis for only so long w i t h o u t doing something to make life a little interesting, as he demonstrated so conclusively on *Thursday.* By the school year's end Miss Fabricant must have waxed nostalgic for the days w h e n Kevin Khatchadourian did absolutely nothing.

Maybe it goes without saying that the pea plants died, as did the sprouting avocado that replaced them, while at the same time I noticed idly that I was missing a bottle of bleach. There were mysteries: Subsequent to a particular day in January, the m o m e n t I led Kevin by the hand into the classroom, a little girl with Shirley Temple curls began to cry, and her wading worsened until at some point in February she never came back. Another boy, aggressive and rambunctious in September, one of those biffy sorts always boxing your leg and pushing other kids in the sandbox, suddenly became silent and inward, developing at once a severe case of asthma and an inexplicable terror of the coat closet, within five feet of which he would begin to wheeze. W h a t did that have to do with Kevin? I couldn't say; perhaps nothing.

And some of the incidents were pretty harmless, like the time little Jason stuck his feet in his bright red galoshes, only to find t h e m filled with squares of apple-spice cake leftover from snack time. Child's play—if *real* child's play—we'd agree.

W h a t most aggrieved Miss Fabricant, of course, was the fact that one after the other of her other charges started to regress in the potty department. She and I had concurred hopefully at the start of the year that Kevin might be inspired by the example of his peers on bathroom breaks, but I fear that quite the opposite took place, and by the time he graduated there was not just one six-year-old in diapers, but three or four.

I was more unsettled by a couple of passing incidents.

O n e m o r n i n g some delicate slip of a thing nicknamed M u f f e t brought a tea set for show-and-tell. It wasn't any ordinary tea set, b u t an ornate, m a n y - c u p p e d affair w h o s e elements each fit into the formfitted cubbies of a velvet-lined mahogany box.

H e r m o t h e r later huffed that it was a family heirloom that M u f f e t was only allowed to bring out on special occasions. No d o u b t the set should never have been taken to a kindergarten, but the little girl was proud of the many matching pieces and had learned to handle t h e m with care, painstakingly laying out the cups in their saucers w i t h china spoons before a dozen of her classmates as they sat at their knee-high tables. After she'd p o u r e d a r o u n d of "tea" (the ubiquitous pineapple-grapefruit juice), Kevin hoisted his cup by its tiny handle in a salutary toast—and dropped it on the floor.

In rapid succession all eleven of his fellow tea-sippers followed suit. Before Miss Fabricant could get hold of the situation, the saucers and spoons quickly suffered the same tinkling fate, in consequence of which w h e n Muffet's mother retrieved her sobbing daughter that afternoon, nothing remained of the treasured tea set but the pot.

If I had ever nursed the hope that my son might t u r n out to display leadership qualities, this is n o t what I had in mind.

Yet w h e n I made a remark to this effect, Miss Fabricant was in no m o o d for drollery. I felt that in general her early twenties exhilaration at molding all those receptive little moppets into multiculturally aware, environmentally responsible vegetarians driven to rectify inequities in the Third World was beginning to fray around the edges. This was her first year of flaking poster paint from her eyebrows, going to sleep at night with the salty taste of paste in her gums, and exiling so many children at a shot for a " t i m e - o u t " that there was no longer any activity to take a time out from. After all, she had announced at o u r introduction in September that she "simply *loves* children," a declaration of which I am eternally dubious. From young w o m e n like Miss

Fabricant, with a blunt snub of a nose like a Charlotte potato and hips like Idahos, the infeasible assertion seems to decode, "I want to get married." Myself, after having n o t *a* child but this particular one, I couldn't see h o w anyone could claim to *love children* in the generic any more that anyone could credibly claim to *love people* in a sufficiendy sweeping sense as to embrace Pol Pot, D o n Rickles, and an upstairs neighbor w h o does 2,000 j u m p i n g jacks at three in the morning.

After relating her terrible tale in a breathless stage whisper, she clearly expected me to leap to cover the cost of the tea set.

Financially of course I could afford to, whatever it was worth, but I could not afford the attendant assumption of total blame. Face it, Franklin, you'd have had a fit. You were touchy about your son's being singled out, or as you would say, *persecuted.* Technically he had only broken the one setting, and covering one-twelfth of the loss was the most compensation you would countenance.

I also offered to speak to Kevin about "respecting the property of others," though Miss Fabricant was underwhelmed by this assurance. Maybe she intuited that these set lectures of mine had begun to hit with the swinging, mocking cadence of the *one-potato, two-potato* rhymes to which girls skip rope.

"That wasn't very nice, Kevin," I said in the car. "Breaking Muffet's teacup." I've no idea w h y we parents persist in believing that our kids yearn to be thought of as *nice,* since w h e n we ourselves commend acquaintances as *very nice* we usually mean they're dull.

"She has a stupid name."

" T h a t doesn't mean she deserves—"

"It slipped," he said lamely.

"That's not what Miss Fabricant said."

" H o w would she know." He yawned.

" H o w would *you* feel, kiddo, if you had something that you cared about more than anything, and you brought it to show to the class, and then someone smashed it?"

"Like what?" he asked, innocence tinged with self-congratulation.

— 2 1 3 —

I reached casually in my head for an example of a possession that Kevin especially cherished, and it wasn't there. Searching harder, I felt the same rising dismay of patting down all my pockets after discovering that the one in which I always kept my wallet was empty. It was unnatural. In my o w n rather underfurnished childhood, I was a fetishistic custodian of the lowliest keepsake, from a three-legged w i n d u p donkey named Cloppity to a rinsed-out four-pack of food-coloring bottles.

It's not as if Kevin didn't have things in abundance, since you showered him with toys. I'd feel unkind in pointing out that he ignored these Junior Game Boys and Tonka d u m p trucks across the board, save that your very excess seemed to signal an awareness that n o n e of your previous gifts had taken. Maybe your generosity backfired, by lining his playroom in what must have seemed a kind of plastic dirt; and maybe he could tell that commercial presents were easy for us, being rich, and so, however expensive, cheap.

But I had spent weeks at a time crafting homespun,

personalized playthings that should hypothetically have *meant something.* I made sure Kevin watched me, too, so that he k n e w t h e m for labors of love. T h e most curiosity he ever exhibited was to ask irritably why I didn't just *buy* a storybook. Otherwise, once my hand-drawn children's b o o k was sandwiched between painted pressboard covers, drilled and hole-punched and b o u n d with bright yarn, he looked vacantly out the w i n d o w as I read it aloud. I admit that the story line was hackneyed, about a litde boy w h o loses his beloved dog, Snippy, and becomes distraught and looks

everywhere and of course in the end Snippy shows u p — I probably borrowed it from *Lassie.* I've never pretended to be a gifted creative writer, and the watercolors bled; I was suffering from the delusion that it's the thought that counts. But no matter h o w many references to the little boy's dark hair and deep brown eyes I planted, I couldn't get him to identify with the boy in the story w h o pines for his lost puppy. (R e m e m b e r w h e n you wanted to buy Kevin a dog? I begged you not to. I was glad you

never forced me to explain, since I never explained it to myself.

I just k n o w that whenever I envisioned our bouncing black lab, or trusting Irish setter, I was filled with horror.) T h e only interest he displayed in the b o o k was w h e n I left h i m alone with it to get dinner, only to find that he'd scribbled Magic Marker on every page—an early *interactive edition,* it seems. Later he drowned the stuffed-sock, button-eyed Teddy, aptly as it happens, in Bear Lake; he fed several pieces of my black-and-white w o o d e n jigsaw of a zebra d o w n the driveway's drain.

I clutched at ancient history. " R e m e m b e r your squirt gun?"

H e shrugged.

" R e m e m b e r w h e n M o m m e r lost her temper, and stamped on it, and it broke?" I had got into the queer habit of referring to myself in the third person; I may have already begun to dissociate, and " M o m m e r " was n o w my virtuous alter ego, a pleasingly plump maternal icon with floury hands and a fire surging in a p o t -

bellied stove w h o solved disputes between neighborhood urchins with spellbinding fables and hot Toll House cookies. Meantime, Kevin had dropped *Mommer* altogether, thereby demoting the neologism to my own rather silly name for myself. In the car, I was disquieted to realize that he had ceased to call me anything at all. That seemed impossible, but your children generally use your name w h e n they want something, if only

attention, and Kevin was loath to beseech me for so m u c h as a turned head. "You didn't like that, did you?"

"I didn't care," said Kevin.

My hands slithered d o w n the wheel from ten-and-two to a desultory seven-and-five. His m e m o r y was accurate. Since according to you in defacing my maps he had *only been trying to help,* you replaced the squirt gun, w h i c h he tossed into his slag heap of a toy box and never touched. T h e squirt gun had served its purpose. Indeed, I'd had a spooky presentiment w h e n I finished grinding the barrel into the floor that since he *had* been attached to it, he was glad to see it go.

W h e n I told you about the tea set, you were about to brush it off, but I shot you a warning glance; we had talked about the need for presenting a united front. "Hey, Kev," you said lightly. "I k n o w teacups are for girls and sort of prissy, but don't break 'em, okay? It's *uncool.* N o w h o w about some Frisbee? We've just got time to work on that bank shot of yours before dinner."

"Sure, Dad!" I remember watching Kevin streak off to the closet to fetch the Frisbee and puzzling. Hands fisted, elbows flying, he looked for all the world like a regular, rambunctious kid, exhilarated at playing in the yard with his father. Except that it was *too* m u c h like a regular kid; almost studied. Even that *Sure, Dad!* had a rehearsed, *nyeh-nyeh* ring to it that I couldn't put my finger on. I had the same queasy feeling on weekends w h e n Kevin would pipe up—yes, *pipe up*—"Gosh, Dad, it's Saturday!

Can we go see another *battlefield?."* You'd be so enchanted that I couldn't bring myself to raise the possibility that he was pulling your leg. Likewise, I watched out the dining r o o m w i n d o w and could not believe, somehow, that Kevin was quite that inept at throwing a Frisbee after all this time. He still tossed the disc on its side, hooking the rim on his middle finger, and curled it ten yards from your feet. You were patient, but I worried that your very patience tempted Kevin to try it.

O h , I don't remember all the incidents that year aside from the fact that there were several, w h i c h you tagged with the umbrella dismissal, "Eva,

every boy pulls a few pigtails." I spared you a number of accounts, because for me to report any of our son's misbehavior seemed like *telling on him.* I ended up reflecting badly not on him but on myself. If I were his sister I could see it, but could a m o t h e r be a tattletale? Apparendy.

However, the sight I beheld in—I think it was March, well, I ' m not sure why it unnerved me quite so much, but I couldn't keep it to myself I had gone to pick up Kevin at the usual time, and no one seemed to k n o w where he was. Miss Fabricant s expression grew pinched, though by this point, were Kevin abducted by the murderous pedophiles we were then led to believe lurked behind

every bush, I'd suspect her of having hired them. The missing child being our son, it took a while before one of us thought to check the bathrooms, hardly his bolt-hole of choice.

"Here he is!" sang his teacher at the door to the Girls' R o o m .

And then she gasped.

I doubt your recollection of these rusty stories is all that sharp, so allow me to refresh your memory. There was a slight, dark-haired kindergartner named Violetta w h o m I must have mentioned earlier that school year, since she touched me so. She was quiet, withdrawn; she would hide in Miss Fabricant's skirts, and it took me ages to coax her to tell me her name. Quite pretty, really, but you had to look at her carefully to discern that, which most people didn't. They couldn't get past the eczema.

It was dreadful. She was covered in it, these massive scaly patches, red and flaking and sometimes cracked, where it scabbed.

All down her arms and spindly legs, and worst of all across her face. The crinkling texture was reptilian. I'd heard that skin conditions were associated with emotional disorders; maybe I was myself susceptible to

faddish presuppositions, since I couldn't help wondering ifVioletta was being mistreated in some way or if her parents were undergoing a fractious divorce. In any case, every time I laid eyes on her something caved in me, and I fought the impulse to gather her in my arms. I'd never have wished vast angry blemishes on our son per se, but this was just the sort of heartbreaking affliction for which I had hankered at Dr. Foulke's: some temporary misfortune that would heal but that would meantime stir in me when faced with my own boy the same bottomless pool of sympathy that rippled whenever Violetta—a stranger's child—shuffled bashfully into view.

I've only had one outbreak of eczema, on my shin, just a taste but enough to know that it itches like fury. I'd overheard her mother urging the girl murmurously not to scratch and assumed that the tube of cream that Violetta always carried, clutched shamefully in the pocket of her jumper, was an anti-itch ointment,

since if it was a curative it was snake oil; I'd never seenVioletta's eczema do anything but get worse. But those antipruritics are only so effective, and her self-control was impressive. She'd trace a fingernail tantalizingly over her arm, and then grasp the offending hand with the other, as if putting it on a leash.

Anyway, when Miss Fabricant gasped, I joined her in the doorway. Kevin's back was to us, and he was whispering. W h e n I pushed the door open a little more, he stopped and stepped back. Facing us before the washbasins wasVioletta. Her face was hfted in what I can only describe as an expression of bliss. Her eyes were closed, her arms crossed sepulchrally with each hand at the opposite shoulder, her body hsting in a kind of swoon. I'm sure we'd have neither begrudged this benighted little girl the ecstasy she so deserved, except for the fact that she was covered with blood.

I don't mean to be melodramatic. It soon became clear after Miss Fabricant shrieked and pushed Kevin aside for paper towels thatVioletta's abrasions weren't as bad as they looked. I restrained her hands from raking her upper

arms while her teacher dabbed moistened towels on her limbs and face, desperately trying to clean her up a bit before her mother arrived. I attempted to dust the dandruff of white flecks from her navy jumper, but the flakes of skin stuck to the flannel like Velcro. There clearly wasn't time to scrub the splotches of blood from the lacy rim of heranklets and the gathers of her white puffed sleeves. Most of the lacerations were shallow, but they were all over her body, and Miss Fabricant would no sooner daub a patch of eczema—flamed from sullen mauve to incandescent magenta-—than it would bead again, and trickle.

Listen: I don't want to have this argument again. I fully accept that Kevin may never have touched her. As far as I could tell she had clawed herself open without any help. It itched and she'd given in, and I dare say that finally scraping her fingernails into that hideous red crust must have felt delicious. I even sensed a trace of vengefulness in the extent of the damage, or perhaps a misguided medical conviction that with sufFiciendy surgical application she might exfoliate the scaly bane of her existence once and for all.

Still, I've never forgotten my glimpse of her face w h e n we found her, for it bespoke not only plain enjoyment but a release that was wilder, more primitive, almost pagan. She *knew* it would hurt later and she *knew* she was only making her skin condition worse and she *knew* her mother would be beside herself, and it was this very apprehension with which her expression was suffused, and w h i c h gave it, even in a girl of five, a hint of obscenity. She would sacrifice herself to this one glorious gorging, consequences be damned. Why, it was the very grotesquerie of the consequences—the bleeding, the stinging, the hair-tear back home, the unsightly black scabs in the weeks to come—that seemed to lie at the heart of her pleasure.

That night you were furious.

"So a little girl scratched herself. W h a t has that to do with my son?"

" H e was there! This poor girl, flaying herself alive, and he did *nothing."*

"He's not her minder, Eva, he's one of the kids!"

" H e could have called someone, couldn't he? Before it went so far?"

"Maybe, but he's not even six until next m o n t h . You can't expect h i m to be that resourceful or even to recognize what's 'too far' w h e n all she's doing is scratching. N o n e of which remotely explains why you let Kevin squish around the house, all afternoon from the looks of him, plastered in shit!" A rare slip. You forgot to say *poop.*

"It's thanks to *Kevin* that Kevin's diapers stink because it's thanks to *Kevin* that he wears diapers at all." Bathed by his outraged father, Kevin was in his room, but I was aware of the fact that my voice carried. "Franklin, I ' m at my wit's end! I bought all those there's-nothing-dirty-about-poo h o w - t o books and n o w he

thinks they're stupid because they're written for two-year-olds.

We're supposed to wait until he's *interested,* but he's not, Franklin!

W h y should he be w h e n M o t h e r will always clean it up? H o w long are we going to let this go on, until he's in college?"

"Okay, I accept we're in a positive reinforcement loop. It gets him attention —"

"We're not in a loop but a *war,* Franklin. And our troops are decimated. We're short on ammunition. O u r borders are overrun."

" C a n we get something straight? Is this your n e w potty-training theory, let him slum around in his own crap and get it all over our white sofa? This is instructional? Or is it punishment?

Because somehow this latest therapy of yours seems all mixed up with your lunatic indignation that some other kid got an itch."

"He enticed her!'

" O h , for Pete's sake."

"She'd been very, very good about leaving that eczema alone. Suddenly we find her in the bathroom with her n e w little friend, and he's hovering over her and urging her o n . . . M y God, Franklin, you should have seen her! She reminded me of that old scare story that circulated in the sixties about h o w some guy on acid clawed all the skin off his arms because he thought he was infested with bugs."

"Does it occur to you that if the scene was all that terrible then maybe Kevin's a little traumatized himself? That maybe he needs some comfort and reassurance and someone to talk to about it, and not to be banished to his o w n personal sewer? Jesus, they take kids into foster care for less."

"I should be so lucky," I muttered.

"Eva!"

"I was joking!"

" W h a t is *wrong* with you?" you despaired.

" H e wasn't 'traumatized,' he was smug. R i d i n g home, his eyes were sparkling. I haven't seen him that pleased with himself since he eviscerated his birthday cake."

You plopped onto an end of our impractical white couch, head in hands; I couldn't j o i n you, because the other end was still smeared brown. " I ' m pretty m u c h at the end of my rope, too, Eva." You massaged your temples. "But not because of Kevin."

"Is that a threat?—"

"It's n o t a threat—"

" W h a t are you talking about!—"

"Eva, please calm down. I ' m never going to break up our family." There was a time you'd have said instead, *I'll never leave you.* Your more rectitudinous declaration had a solidity about it, where pledges of everlasting devotion to a lover are notoriously frail. So I wondered why your bedrock c o m m i t m e n t to *our family* made me sad.

"I dress him," I said. "I feed h i m w h e n he lets me, I ferry h i m everywhere. I bake his kindergarten snacks. I ' m at his beck from m o r n i n g to night. I change his diapers six times a day, and all I hear about is the one afternoon that he so disturbed me, even frightened me, that I couldn't bear to c o m e near him. I wasn't exactly trying to punish him. But in that bathroom, he seemed so, a h — " I discarded three or four adjectives as too inflammatory, then finally gave up. " C h a n g i n g him was too intimate."

"Listen to yourself. Because I have no idea what kid you're talking about.We have a happy, healthy boy. And I ' m beginning to think he's unusually bright." (I stopped myself from interjecting, *That's what I'm afraid of.)* "If he sometimes keeps to himself, that's because he's thoughtful, reflective. Otherwise, he plays with me, he hugs me good night, I read him stories. W h e n it's just me and him, he tells me everything—"

"Meaning, he tells you what?"

You raised your palms. " W h a t he's been drawing, what they had for snack —"

"And you think that's *telling you everything."*

"Are you out of your mind? He's five years old, Eva, what else is there to tell?"

"For starters? W h a t happened last year, in that after-preschool

play group. O n e after another, every m o t h e r took her kids out.

O h , there was always some excuse—-Jordan keeps catching colds, Tiffany is uncomfortable being the youngest. Until it's d o w n to just me and Lorna's kids, and she mumbles something about it not being m u c h of a group anymore and calls it quits. A few weeks later I stop by Lorna's unannounced to drop off a Christmas present? All the old play group is reassembled in her living room.

She was embarrassed and we didn't address it, but since Kevin *tells you everything* why n o t get him to explain what might drive all those mothers to sneak off and reconvene in secret, all to exclude our 'happy, healthy' son."

"I wouldn't ask him because that's an ugly story that would hurt his feelings. A n d I don't see the mystery—-gossip and cliquishness and small-town fallings out. Typical of stay-at-home mothers with time on their hands."

" I ' m one of those *stay-at-home* mothers, at considerable sacrifice I'd remind you, and the last thing we have is time on our hands."

"So he was blackballed! W h y doesn't that make you angry at them? W h y assume it was something our son did, and n o t some neurotic hen with a bug up her ass?"

"Because I ' m all too well aware that Kevin doesn't *tell me everything.* O h , and you could also ask h i m w h y not one baby-sitter will come back a second night."

"I don't need to. Most teenagers around here get an allowance of S100 a week. *Only* 12 bucks an h o u r isn't very tempting."

" T h e n at least you could get your sweet, confiding little boy to tell you *just exactly what he said to Violetta."*

It's not as if we fought all the time. To the contrary, though, it's the fights I remember; f u n n y h o w the nature of a normal day is the first m e m o r y to fade. I ' m not one of those sorts, either, w h o thrives on t u r m o i l — m

o r e s the pity, as it turns out. Still, I may have been glad to scratch the dry surface of our day-to-day peaceableness the way Violetta had clawed the sere crust on her

limbs, anything to get something bright and liquid flowing again, out in the open and slippery between our fingers. That said, I feared what lay beneath. I feared that at bottom I hated my life and hated being a mother and even in moments hated being your wife, since you had done this to me, turned my days into an unending stream of shit and piss and cookies that Kevin didn't even like.

Meanwhile, no amount of shouting was resolving the diaper crisis. In a rare inversion of our roles, you were apt to regard the problem as all very internally complicated, and I thought it was simple: We wanted him to use the toilet, so he wouldn't.

Since we weren't about to stop wanting him to use the toilet, I was at a loss.

You doubtless found my usage of the word *war* preposterous.

But in corralling Kevin to the changing table—now small for the purpose; his legs dangled over its raised flap—I was often reminded of those scrappy guerrilla conflicts in which underequipped, ragtag rebel forces manage to inflict surprisingly serious losses on powerful armies of state. Lacking the vast if unwieldy arsenal of the establishment, the rebels fall back on cunning. Their attacks, while often slight, are frequent, and sustained aggravation can be more demoralizing over time than a few high-casualty spectaculars. At such an ordnance disadvantage, guerrillas use whatever lies at hand, sometimes finding in the material of the everyday a devastating dual purpose. I gather that you can make bombs, for example, out of methanating manure. For his part, Kevin, too, ran a seat-of-the-pants operation, and Kevin, too, had learned to form a weapon from shit.

O h , he submitted to being changed placidly enough. He seemed to bask in the ritual and may have inferred from my growing briskness a gratifying embarrassment, for swabbing his tight little testicles w h e n he was nearly six was beginning to feel risque.

If Kevin enjoyed our trysts, I did not. I have never been persuaded that even an infant's effluents smell precisely "sweet";

a kindergartner's feces benefit from no such reputation. Kevin's had grown firmer and stickier, and the nursery n o w exuded the sour fug of subway tunnels colonized by the homeless. I felt sheepish about the mounds of nonbiodegradable Pampers we contributed to the local landfill. Worst of all, some days Kevin seemed deliberately to hold his intestines in check for a second strike. If no Leonardo of the crayon world, he had a virtuoso's command of his sphincter.

Mind, I'm setting the table here, but hardly excusing what happened that July. I don't expect you to be anything but horrified. I'm not even asking your forgiveness; it's late for that.

But I badly need your understanding.

Kevin graduated from kindergarten in June, and we were stuck with one another all summer. (Listen, I got on Kevin's nerves as much as he got on mine.) Despite Miss Fabricant s modest successes with Drano illustrations, the Montessori method was not working wonders in our home. Kevin had still not learned to play. Left to entertain himself, he would sit like a lump on the floor with a moody detachment that turned the atmosphere of the whole house oppressive. So I tried to involve him in projects, assembling yarn and buttons and glue and scraps of colorful fabric in the playroom for making sock puppets. I'd join him on the carpet and have a cracking good time myself, really, except in the end I would have made a nibbling rabbit with a red felt mouth and big floppy blue ears and drinking-straw whiskers, and Kevin's arm would sport a plain knee-high dipped in paste. I didn't

expect our child to necessarily be a crafts wunderkind, but he could at least have made an effort.

I also tried to give him a j u m p on first grade by tutoring him on the basics."Let's work on our numbers!" I'd propose.

"What for."

"So when you get to school you'll be better than anyone else at arithmetic."

"What good is arithmetic."

"Well, you remember yesterday, and M o m m e r paid the bills?

You have to be able to add and subtract to pay bills, and k n o w h o w m u c h money you have left."

"You used a calculator."

"Well, you have to k n o w arithmetic to be sure the calculator is right."

" W h y would you use it at all if it doesn't always work."

"It always works," I begrudge.

"So you don't need arithmetic."

"To use a calculator," I say, flustered, "you still have to k n o w what a five looks like, all right? Now, let's practice our counting.

W h a t comes after three?"

"Seven," says Kevin.

We would proceed in this fashion, until once after one more random exchange ("What comes before nine?" "Fifty-three.") he looked me lifelessly in the eye and droned in a fast-forward m o n o t o n e , "Onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnineteneleven-twelve...," pausing two or three times for a breath but otherwise making it flawlessly to a hundred. " N o w can we quit?" I certainly felt the fool.

I roused no more enthusiasm for literacy. " D o n ' t tell me," I'd cut h i m off after raising the prospect of reading t i m e . " *What for.*

What good is if. Well, I'll tell you. Sometimes you're going to be bored and there's nothing to do except you can always read a book. Even on the train or at a bus stop."

" W h a t if the b o o k is boring."

" T h e n you find a different one. T h e r e are more books in the world than you'll ever have time to read, so you'll never run out."

" W h a t if they're all boring."

"I don't think that would be possible, Kevin," I'd say crisply.

"I think it's possible," he'd differ.

"Besides, w h e n you grow up you'll need a job, and then you'll have to be able to read and write really well or no one will want to hire you." Privately, of course, I reflected that if this were true most of the country would be unemployed.

" D a d doesn't write. He drives around and takes pictures."

" T h e r e are other j o b s — "

" W h a t if I don't want a job."

" T h e n you'd have to go on *welfare.* T h e government would give you just a little money so you don't starve, but not enough to do anything fun."

" W h a t if I don't want to do anything."

"I bet you will. If you make your o w n money, you can go to movies and restaurants and even different countries, like M o m m e r used to." At *used to,* I winced.

"I think I want to go on welfare." It was the kind of line I'd heard other parents repeat with a chortle at dinner parties, and I struggled to find it adorable.

I don't k n o w h o w those home-schooling families pull it off.

Kevin never seemed to be paying any attention, as if listening were an indignity. Yet somehow, behind my back, he picked up what he needed to know. He learned the way he ate—furtively, on the sly, shoveling information like a fisted cheese sandwich w h e n no one was watching. He hated to admit he didn't k n o w something already, and his blanket playing-dumb routine was cunningly crafted to cover any genuine gaps in his education.

In Kevins mind, pretend-ignorance wasn't shameful, and I was never able to discriminate between his feigned stupidity and the real thing. H e n c e if at the dinner table I decried R o b i n Williams's role in *Dead Poets Society* as *trite,* I felt obliged to explain to Kevin that the word meant "like what lots of people have done already."

But he'd receive this definition with a precocious *uh-duh.* H a d he learned the word *trite* at three, w h e n he was faking not being able to talk at all? You tell me.

In any event, after belligerently botching his alphabet for weeks ("What comes after R ? " *Elemenno),* he interrupted one of my diatribes— about h o w he couldn't just sit there and expect learning to pour into his ear all by itself—by singing the alphabet song impeccably start to finish, albeit with

an aggressive tunelessness that even for the tin-eared was improbable and tinged

with a minor key that made this bouncy children's p n e u m o n i c sound like kaddish. I suppose they'd taught it at Love-'n'-Learn, not that Kevin had let on. W h e n he finished mockingly, *Now I've said my ABCs, tell me what you think of me,* I snapped furiously,

"I think you're a wicked little boy w h o enjoys wasting his mother's time!" and he smiled, extravagantly, with both sides of his m o u t h .

He wasn't precisely disobedient, which is one detail that the Sunday magazine exposes often got wrong. Indeed, he could follow the letter of his assignments with chilling precision.

After the obligatory period of aping incompetence—crippled, unclosed P's wilting below the line as if they'd been shot—he sat d o w n on c o m m a n d and wrote perfectly within the lines of his exercise book, "Look, Sally, look. Go. Go. Go. R u n . R u n . R u n .

R u n , Sally, R u n . " I have no way of explaining w h y it was rather awful, except that he exposed to me the insidious nihilism of the grade-school primer. Even the way he f o r m e d those letters made me uneasy.They had no character. I mean, he didn't really develop *handwriting* as we understand it, connotatively the personal stamp on standardized script. From the point he admitted he k n e w how, his printing unerringly replicated the examples in his textbook, with no extra tails or squiggles;hisT's were crossed and Is dotted, and never before had the bloated interior of B s and O's and D's seemed to contain so much empty space.

My point is that, however technically biddable, he was exasperating to teach. You could savor his remarkable progress w h e n you came home, but I was never treated to those *Eureka!*

moments of sudden breakthrough that reward an adult's hours of patient coaxing and m i n d - n u m b i n g repetition. It is no more satisfying to teach a child w h o refuses to learn in plain view than it is to feed one by leaving a plate behind in the kitchen. He was clearly denying me satisfaction on purpose. He was determined that I should feel useless and unneeded. T h o u g h I may n o t have been as convinced as you were that o u r son was a genius, he was—well, I suppose he still is, if such things can be said of a boy w h o clings to an act of such crowning idiocy— very bright. But my day-to-day experience as his tutor was that of instructing an *exceptional child* only in the euphemistic tradition that seems to concoct an ever more dishonest name for *moron* every year. I would drill what-is-two-plus-three *over* and *over* and *over,* until once w h e n he staunchly, maliciously refused to say five one more time I sat him down, scrawled,

12,387

6,945

138,964

3,987,234

scored a line under it and said, "There! Add that up then! A n d multiply it by 25 while you're at it, since you think you're so smart!"

I missed you during the day, as I missed my old life w h e n I was t o o busy to miss you during the day. H e r e I had b e c o m e quite well versed in Portuguese history d o w n to the order of the monarchy and h o w many Jews were murdered during the Inquisition, and n o w I was reciting the alphabet. N o t the Cyrillic alphabet, n o r the H e b r e w one, the *alphabet.* Even if Kevin had proved an ardent pupil, for me the regime would doubtless have felt like a demotion of the precipitous sort c o m m o n l y constrained to dreams: Suddenly I ' m sitting in the back of the class, taking a test with a broken pencil and no pants. Nonetheless, I might have abided this h u m b l i n g role if it weren't for the additional humiliation of hving, for over six years now, up to my elbows in shit.

O k a y — o u t with it.

There came an afternoon in July that, per tradition, Kevin had soiled his diapers once and been cleaned up with the whole diaper cream and talcum routine, only to complete the evacuation of his bowels twenty minutes later.

Or so I assumed. But this time he outdid himself. This was the

same afternoon that, after I had insisted he write a sentence that was meaningful about his life and not one more tauntingly inert line about Sally, he wrote in his exercise book, "In kendergarden evrybody says my mother looks rilly old." I'd turned beet-red, and that was w h e n I sniffed another telltale waft. After I'd just changed him *twice.* He was sitting cross-legged on the floor, and I lifted h i m to a stand by the waist, pulling his Pampers open to make sure. I lost it. " H o w do you *do* it?" I shouted. "You hardly *eat* anything, where does it *come* from?"

A rush of heat rippled up through my body, and I barely noticed that Kevin was n o w dangling with his feet off the carpet.

He seemed to weigh nothing, as if that tight, dense little body stocked with such inexhaustible quantities of shit was packed instead with Styrofoam peanuts.There's no other way to say this.

I threw him halfway across the nursery. He landed with a dull clang against the edge of the stainless steel changing table. His head at a quizzical tilt, as if he were finally *interested* in something, he slid, in seeming slow motion, to the floor.

A

JANUARY 1 9 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

So n o w you know.

I had rash hopes w h e n I first rushed over to h i m that he was all r i g h t — h e looked unmarked—until I rolled h i m over to reveal the arm he fell on. His forearm must have struck the edge of the changing table w h e n for the first time, as you once remarked in jest, our son had learned to fly. It was bleeding and a little crooked and bulging in the middle with something white poking out and I felt sick. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!* I whispered.Yet however weak with remorse, I was still intoxicated from a m o -

m e n t that may p u t the he to my preening incomprehension of *Thursday.* On its far side, I was aghast. But the very center of the m o m e n t was bliss. Hurtling our little boy I-didn't-care-where-besides-away, I had heedlessly given over, like Violetta, to clawing a chronic, torturous itch.

Before you c o n d e m n me utterly, I beg you to understand just h o w hard I'd been trying to be a good mother. But trying to be a good mother may be as distant from being a good mother as trying to have a good time is from truly having one.

Distrusting my every impulse from the instant he was laid on my breast, I'd followed a devout regime of hugging my little boy an average of three times a day, admiring something he did or said at least twice, and reciting *I love you, kiddo* or *You know that your Daddy and I love you very much* with the predictable uniformity of liturgical professions of faith. But too strictly observed, most sacraments grow hollow. Moreover, for six solid years I'd

put my every utterance on the five-second delay of call-in radio shows, just to make sure I didn't broadcast anything obscene, slanderous, or contrary to company policy. T h e vigilance came at a cost. It made me remote, halting, and awkward.

W h e n hoisting Kevin's body in that fluid adrenal lift, for once I'd felt graceful,because at last there was an unmediated confluence between what I felt and what I did. It isn't very nice to admit, but domestic violence has its uses. So raw and unleashed, it tears away the veil of civilization that comes between us as m u c h as it makes life possible. A p o o r substitute for the sort of passion we like to extol perhaps, but real love shares more in c o m m o n with hatred and rage than it does with geniality or politeness. For two seconds I'd felt whole, and like Kevin Khatchadourian's real mother. I felt close to him. I felt like myself—my true, unexpurgated self—and I felt we were finally communicating.

As I swept a shock of hair from his moist forehead, the muscles of Kevin's face worked furiously; his eyes screwed up and his m o u t h grimaced into a near-smile. Even w h e n I ran to fetch that morning's *New York Times* and slipped it under his arm he did not cry. Holding the paper under the a r m — I still remember the headline by his elbow, " M o r e A u t o n o m y for Baltics Stirs Discomfort in M o s c o w " — I helped him to his feet, asking if anything else hurt and he shook his head. I started to pick h i m up, another shake; he would walk.Together we shuffled to the phone. It's possible that he wiped away the odd tear w h e n I wasn't looking, but Kevin would no m o r e suffer in plain view than he would learn to count.

O u r local pediatrician Dr. Goldblatt m e t us at Nyack Hospital's tiny, crushingly intimate emergency room, where I felt certain that everyone could tell what I'd done. T h e notice for the " N e w York Sheriff's Victim Hotline" beside the registration w i n d o w seemed posted specially for my son. I talked too m u c h and said too little; I babbled to the admissions nurse about what had

happened but not how. Meantime Kevin's unnatural self-control had mutated into the bearing of a martinet; he stood straight with his chin lifted, and turned at right angles. Having assumed responsibility for supporting his arm with the newspaper, he allowed Dr. Goldblatt to hold his shoulder as he marched d o w n the hall but shook off my hand. W h e n he entered the orthopedic surgeon's examining room, he about-faced in the doorway to announce briskly, "I can see the doctor by myself."

" D o n ' t you want me to keep you company, in case it hurts?"

"You can wait out there," he commanded, the muscles rippling in his clenched jaw the only indication that it hurt already.

"That's quite a little man you've got there, Eva," said Dr.

Goldblatt. "Sounds like you got your orders." To my horror, he closed the door.

I did, I really did want to be there for Kevin. I was desperate to reestablish that I was a parent he could trust, not a monster w h o would hurl him about the r o o m at a moment's notice like a vengeful apparition from *Poltergeist.* But, yes, I was also in dread that Kevin would tell the surgeon or Benjamin Goldblatt what I'd done. They have laws about these things. I could be arrested; my case could be written up in the *Rockland County Times* in an appalled sidebar. I could, as I had so tastelessly joked that I would welcome, have Kevin taken away from me for real. At a m i n i m u m I might have to submit to mortifying monthly visits from some disapproving social worker sent to check my son for bruises.

However m u c h I deserved rebuke, I still preferred the slow b u r n of private self-excoriation to the hot lash of public reproof.

So as I stared glaze-eyed into the glassed-in case preserving gushy letters to the nursing staff from satisfied customers, I scrambled for soft-core rewrites. *Oh, doctor, you know how boys exaggerate. Throw him? He was running headlong down the hall, and when I walked out of the bedroom I bumped into him, by accident...*

Then he, ah, of course he fell, hard, against—against the lamp stand...!

I sickened myself, and every whitewash I concocted sounded preposterous. I had plenty of time to stew in my o w n juices on

one of those hard, sea-green metal chairs in the waiting room, too; a nurse informed me that our son had to undergo surgery to have his "bone ends cleansed," a procedure I was more than happy to have remain opaque.

But w h e n Kevin emerged three hours later with his blindingly white cast, Dr. Goldblatt patted our son on the back and admired what a brave young man I had raised, while the orthopedic surgeon impersonally detailed the nature of the break, the dangers of infection, the importance of keeping the cast dry, and the date Kevin should return for follow-up care. Both doctors were kind enough to omit mention of the fact that the staff had been obliged to change our son's dirty diapers; Kevin no longer smelled. My head bobbed dumbly up and down until I stole a quick glance at Kevin, w h o met my eyes with the clear, sparkling gaze of perfect complicity.

I owed him one. He k n e w I owed h i m one. And I would owe him one for a very long time.

Driving back home, I chattered (*What Mommer did was very, very wrong, and she is so, so sorry*—though this distancing device of the third person must have cast my regrets in a dubious light, as if I were already blaming the incident on my imaginary friend).

Kevin said nothing. His expression aloof, almost haughty, the fingers of his plastered right arm tucked Napoleonically in his shirt, he sat upright in the front seat and surveyed the flashes of the Tappan Zee Bridge through the side window, for all the world Hke a triumphant general, w o u n d e d nobly in battle, n o w basking in the cheers of the crowd.

I enjoyed no such equipoise. I might have escaped the police and social services, but I was condemned to run one more gauntlet.

W h e t h e r up against the wall I might have contrived some cock-and-bull about *bumping into* Kevin for Dr. Goldblatt, I could not imagine locking eyes and flinging patent nonsense at you.

"Hi! W h e r e were you guys?" you shouted w h e n we walked into the kitchen.Your back was turned as you finished slathering peanut butter on a Ritz cracker.

— 234 —

My heart was thumping, and I still had no idea what I was going to say. So far, I had never wittingly done anything that would imperil our marriage—or ***OUT*** *family*—but I was sure that if anything would push us to the brink, this was it.

"—-Jesus, Kev!" you exclaimed with a m o u t h covered in crumbs, swallowing hard without having chewed. " W h a t the heck happened to *you?"*

You brushed your hands hastily and plunged to your knees before Kevin. My skin prickled all over, as if someone had just switched on the voltage and I were an electric fence. I had that distinctive presentiment of I-have-one-more-second-or-two-after-which-nothing-will-ever-be-the-same-again, the same limp apprehension of spotting an o n c o m i n g car in your lane w h e n it's too late to turn the wheel.

But headlong collision was averted at the last minute. Already accustomed to trusting your son's version of events over your wife's, you had gone straight to Kevin. This once you were mistaken. H a d you asked me, I promise—or at least I like to think—that, with bowed head, I'd have told you the truth.

"I broke my arm."

"I can see that. H o w ' d that happen?"

"I fell."

" W h e r e ' d you fall?"

"I had poopy pants. M o m m e r went to get more wipes. I fell off the changing table. O n — o n t o my Tonka d u m p truck.

M o m m e r took m e t o D o c t o r Goldbutt."

He was good. He was very, very good; you may n o t appreciate h o w good. He was s m o o t h — t h e story was ready.

N o n e of the details were inconsistent or gratuitous; he had spurned the extravagant fantasies with w h i c h most children his age w o u l d camouflage a spilled drink or broken mirror. He had learned w h a t all skilled liars register if they're ever to make a career of it: Always appropriate as m u c h of the truth as possible.

A well-constructed lie is assembled largely f r o m the alphabet blocks of fact, w h i c h will as easily make a pyramid as a platform.

He did have p o o p y pants. He remembered, correctly, that the second time I changed h i m that afternoon I had finished the open b o x of Wet Wipes. He had, m o r e or less, fallen off the changing table. His Tonka d u m p truck was i n d e e d — I checked later that n i g h t — o n the nursery floor at the time. Furthermore, I marveled at his having intuited that simply falling three feet onto the floor w o u l d probably not be e n o u g h to break his arm; he w o u l d need to land haplessly on some hard metal object.

A n d however short, his tale was laced w i t h elegant touches: Using *Mommer* w h e n he had eschewed the cutesy sobriquet for m o n t h s lent his story a cuddly, affectionate cast that fantastically belied the real story; *Doctor Goldbutt* was playfully scatological, setting you at ease— your

happy, healthy boy was already back to normal. Perhaps most impressive of all, he did not, as he had at the emergency room, allow himself the one collusive glance in my direction that might have given the game away.

"Gosh," you exclaimed. "That must have hurt!"

" T h e orthopedist says that for an open fracture," I said, "—it broke the skin—it was pretty clean, and should m e n d well." N o w Kevin and I did look at each other, just long enough to seal the pact. I had ransomed my soul to a six-year-old.

"Are you going to let me sign your cast?" you asked. "That's a tradition, you know. Your friends and family all sign their names and wish you to get well soon."

"Sure, Dad! But first I got to go to the bathroom." He sauntered off, his free hand swinging.

" D i d I hear that right?" you asked quiedy.

"Guess so." R i g i d for hours—fear is an isometric exercise—I was exhausted, and for once the last thing on my m i n d was our son's toilet training.

You put an arm around my shoulders. "Man, that must have given you a scare."

"It was all my fault," I said, squirming.

" N o mother can watch a kid every second."

I wished you wouldn't be so understanding. "Yes, but I should have—"

"Sh-sh!" You raised a forefinger, and a delicate trickling emitted from the hall bathroom: music to the parental ear. " W h a t do you think did the

trick, just the shock?" you whispered. " O r maybe he's scared of landing back on that changing table."

I shrugged. Despite appearances, I did not beheve that by flying into a rage at yet another soiled diaper I had terrorized our boy into using the toilet. O h , it had everything to do with our set-to in the nursery, all right. *I was being rewarded.*

"This calls for celebration. I ' m going to go in and congratulate that g u y — "

I put a hand on your arm. " D o n ' t push your luck. Let him do it quietly, don't make a big deal out of it. Kevin prefers his reversals off-camera."

That said, I k n e w better than to read pee-pee in the potty as admission of defeat. He had w o n the larger battle; acceding to the toilet was the kind of trifling concession that a magnanimous if condescending victor can afford to toss a vanquished adversary.

O u r six-year-old had successfully tempted me into violating my o w n rules of engagement. I had committed a war crime—for which, barring my son's clement silence, my very husband would extradite me to T h e Hague.

W h e n Kevin returned from the bathroom tugging up his pants with one hand, I proposed that we have big bowl of p o p c o r n for dinner, adding obsequiously, *with lots and lots of salt!* Drinking in the music of the normal life that I had minutes before kissed good-bye—your clamorous banging of pots, the clarion clang of our stainless steel bowl, the merry ratde of kernels —I'd a foreboding that this crawling-on-my-belly-like-a-reptile m o d e could endure almost indefinitely so long as Kevin kept his m o u t h shut.

W h y didn't he blab? By all appearances, he was protecting his mother. All right. I'll allow for that. Nevertheless, a balance-sheet calculation may have entered in. Before a distant expiry date, a

secret accrues interest by dint of having been kept; c o m p o u n d e d by lying, *Know how I really broke my arm, Dad?* might have even more explosive impact in a month's time. Too, so long as he retained the principle of his windfall in his account, he could continue to take out loans against it, whereas blowing his wad all at once would plunge his assets back to a six-year-old's allowance of $5 a week.

Further, after all my sanctimonious singsong lectures *(How would you feel... ?),* I had provided him with a rare opportunity to annex the moral high g r o u n d — w h o s e elevation would afford a few novel views, even if this was not, at length, a territory destined to suit his preferences in real estate. Mr. Divide-and-C o n q u e r may also have intuited that secrets bind and separate in strict accordance with who's in on them. My chatter to you about Kevin's needing to opt for baths over showers to keep the cast dry was artificially bright and stilted; w h e n I asked Kevin whether he wanted parmesan on the popcorn, the question was rich with appeal, terror, and slavish gratitude.

For in one respect I was touched, and remain so: I think he had experienced a closeness to me that he was reluctant to let go. N o t only were we in this cover-up together, but during the very assault we were concealing, Kevin too may have felt whole, yanked to life by the awesome sisal strength of the umbilical tie. For once I'd k n o w n myself for his mother. So he may have k n o w n himself also, sailing amazedly across the nursery like Peter Pan, for my son.

T h e remainder of that summer defied all my narrative instincts.

Had I been scripting a TV movie about a violent harridan w h o flew into fits of blind dudgeon during w h i c h she was endowed with superhuman strength, I'd have had her young boy tiptoeing around the house, shooting her tremulous grins, offering up desperate gestures of appeasement, and just in general shuffling, cowering, and yes-massa-ing about the place, anything to keep

from taking impromptu trips across whole rooms of their h o m e without his feet ever touching the floor.

So m u c h for the movies. *I* tiptoed. *My* grins quivered. *I* shuffled and cowered as if auditioning for a minstrel show.

Because let's talk about power. In the domestic polity, myth dictates that parents are endowed with a disproportionate amount of it. I ' m not so sure. Children? T h e y can break our hearts, for a start. They can shame us, they can bankrupt us, and I can personally attest that they can make us wish we were never born.

W h a t can we do? Keep them from going to the movies. But how? W i t h what do we back up o u r prohibitions if the kid heads belligerendy for the door? T h e crude truth is that parents are like governments: We maintain our authority through the threat, overt or implicit, of physical force. A kid does w h a t we say—not to put too fine a point on it—because we can break his arm.

Yet Kevin's white cast became a blazing emblem, not of what I could do to him, but of what I could not. In resorting to the ultimate power, I had robbed myself of it. Since I could not be trusted to use force in moderation, I was stuck with an impotent arsenal, useless overkill, like a stockpile of nuclear weapons. He k n e w full well that I would never lay a hand on him again.

So in case you worry that in 1989 I became a convert to Neanderthal brutality, all that wholeness and realness and immediacy that I discovered in using Kevin for a shot put evaporated in a N e w York minute. I remember feeling physically shorter. My posture deteriorated. My voice went wispy.To Kevin, I couched my every request as an optional suggestion: *Honey, would you like to get in the car? You wouldn't mind terribly if we went to the store? Maybe it would be a good idea if you didn't pick the crustfrom the middle of Mommer's freshly baked pie.* As for the lessons he found such an insult, I returned to the Montessori method.

At first, he p u t me through a variety of paces, as if training a performing bear. He would demand something time-consuming for his lunch, like

homemade pizza, and after I'd spent the

m o r n i n g kneading dough and simmering sauce he'd pick two pieces of pepperoni off his slices and then fold the remains into a glutinous baseball to pitch to the sink. T h e n he tired of M o t h e r -

as-plaything as quickly as he did of his other toys, which I guess made me lucky.

In fact, as I foisted on the boy the very salt-laden cheesies and whizzies previously meted out in one-ounce rations, my solicitation soon got on his nerves. I had a tendency to hover, and Kevin would shoot me the kind of daggers you fire at a stranger w h o sits next to you on a train w h e n the car is practically empty.

I was proving an unworthy adversary, and any further victories over a guardian already reduced to such a cringing, submissive condition were b o u n d to feel cheap.

Although it was tricky with a sling, he n o w took baths on his own, and if I stooped to wrap him in a fresh towel, he shied, then swaddled himself. In fact, on the heels of having docilely submitted to diaper changing and testicle swabbing, he developed a stern modesty, and by August, I was banished from the bathroom. He dressed in private. Aside from that remarkable two weeks during which he got so sick w h e n he was ten, he would not allow me to see h i m naked again until the age of fourteen—at which point I'd gladly have forfeited the privilege.

As for my incontinent outpouring of tenderness, it was tainted with apology, and Kevin was having n o n e of it. W h e n I kissed his forehead, he wiped it off. W h e n I combed his hair, he batted me away and rumpled his locks. W h e n I hugged him, he objected coldly that I was hurting his arm. And w h e n I averred,

"I love you, k i d d o " — n o longer recited with the solemnity of the Apostle's Creed but rather with the feverish, mindless supplication of a Hail Mary—he'd assume a caustic expression from which that permanent left-hand cock of his m o u t h was enduringly to emerge. O n e day w h e n I avowed yet again *I love you, kiddo,* Kevin shot back, *Nyeh NYEE nyeh, nyeh-nyeeeeh!* and I gave it a rest.

He clearly believed that he had f o u n d me out. He had glimpsed behind the curtain, and no a m o u n t of cooing and snack

food w o u l d erase a vision at least as indelible as a first encounter with parental sex. Yet w h a t surprised me was h o w m u c h this revelation of his mother's true colors— her viciousness, her violence—seemed to please him. If he had my number, it was one that intrigued h i m far m o r e than the twos and threes of o u r dreary arithmetic drills before his "accident," and he side-eyed his m o t h e r with a brand n e w — I wouldn't call it quite respect— *interest.* Yes.

As for you and me, until that summer I'd b e c o m e accustomed to concealing things from you, but mostly thought crimes—my atrocious blankness at Kevin's birth, my aversion to our house. While to some extent we all shelter one another from the cacophony of horrors in our heads, even these intangible unsaids made me mournful. B u t it was one thing to keep my own counsel about the dread that had descended on me whenever it was time to fetch our son from kindergarten, quite another to neglect to tell you that, oh, by the way, I broke his arm. However wicked, thoughts didn't seem to take up space in my body, w h d e keeping a three-dimensional secret was like having swallowed a cannonball.

You seemed so far away. I'd gaze at you as you undressed at night with a spectral nostalgia, half expecting that w h e n I crossed to brush my teeth you'd step through my body as easdy as through moonlight. Watching you in the backyard teaching Kevin to cup a baseball in a catcher's mitt with his good right h a n d — t h o u g h in truth he seemed more gifted with pizza—

I'd press my palm against a sun-warmed windowpane as if against a spiritual barrier, stabbed by the same vertiginous well-wishing and aching sense of exclusion that would have tortured me had I been dead. Even w h e n I put my hand on your chest, I couldn't seem to quite touch you, as if every time you shed your clothes there were, like Bartholomew's hats, another L. L. Bean w o r k shirt underneath.

Meantime, you and I never went out just the two of us anymore—to catch *Crimes and Misdemeanors,* grab a bite at the River Club in N y a c k , m u c h less to indulge ourselves at the U n i o n

Square Cafe in the city. It's true that we had trouble with sitters, but you acquiesced to our housebound nights readily enough, prizing the light summer evenings for coaching Kevin on fourth downs, three-pointer field goals, and the infield-fly rule. Your blindness to the fact that Kevin displayed neither interest nor aptitude in any of these sports nagged me a bit, but I was mosdy disappointed that you didn't ever covet the same *quality time* with your wife.

There's no purpose to talking around it. I was jealous. A n d I was lonely.

It was toward the end of August w h e n our next-door neighbor leaned on our doorbell with censorious insistence. I heard you answer it from the kitchen.

"You tell your kid it's not funny!" R o g e r Corley exclaimed.

" W h o a , s l o w down,Rog!"said you."Criticize anybody's sense of humor, gotta tell the j o k e first." Despite your jocular cadence, you did not invite him in, and w h e n I peered out to the foyer I noticed that you had only opened the door halfway.

"Trent just rode his bike d o w n that big hill on Palisades Parade, lost control, and landed in the bushes! He's knocked up pretty bad!"

I'd tried to stay on amicable terms with the Corleys, whose son was a year or two older than Kevin. T h o u g h Moira Corley's initial enthusiasm for arranging play dates had waned without explanation, she'd once displayed a gracious interest in my Armenian background, and I'd stopped by only the day before to give her a loaf of freshly baked *katah*—do you ever miss it?—that slightly sweet, obscenely buttery layered bread my mother taught me to make. Being on congenial terms with your neighbors was one of the few appeals of suburban life, and I feared that your narrowing our front door was beginning to appear unfriendly.

"Roger," I said behind you, wiping my hands on a dish towel,

" w h y don't you come in and talk about it? You seem upset."

W h e n we all repaired to the living room, I noted that Roger's

getup was a little unfortunate; he had too big a gut for Lycra cycling shorts, and in those bike shoes he walked pigeon-toed.

You retreated behind an armchair, keeping it between you and R o g e r like a military fortification."I'm awful sorry to hear about Trent's accident," you said. "Maybe it's a good opportunity to go through the fundamentals of bike safety."

" H e *knows* the fundamentals," said Roger. "Like, you never leave the quick-release on one of your wheels flipped *open."*

"Is that what you think happened?" I asked.

"Trent said the front wheel started wobbling. We checked the bike, and the release wasn't only flipped over; it'd been turned a few times to loosen the fork. Doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to conclude that *Kevin* was the culprit!"

" N o w wait just one minute!" you said. "That's one hell of a — "

"Trent rode that bike yesterday morning, no problem.

Nobody's been by since but you, Eva, along with your son. And I want to thank you for that bread you sent over," he added, lowering the volume. "It was real good, and we appreciated your thoughtfiilness. But we don't appreciate Kevin's tinkering with Trent's bike. Going a little faster, or around traffic, my kid could've been killed."

"You're making a lot of assumptions here," you growled."That release could have been tripped in Trent's accident."

" N o way. I ' m a cyclist myself, and I've had my share of spills.

T h e release never flips all the way over—much less turns around by itself to loosen the spring."

"Even if Kevin did do it," I said (you shot me a black look),

"maybe he doesn't k n o w what the lever is for. That leaving it open is dangerous."

"That's one theory," R o g e r grunted. " T h a t your son's a dummy. But that's not the way Trent describes him."

"Look," you said. "Maybe Trent had been playing with that release, and he doesn't want to take the rap. That doesn't mean my son has to take it instead. Now, if you'll excuse us, we've got some w o r k to do around the yard."

After R o g e r left, I had a sinking feeling that the Irish soda bread Moira had promised to bake me in return would never materialize.

"Boy, I sometimes think you're right," you said, pacing. "A kid can't skin his knee anymore without it having to be somebody else's fault. Country's completely lost touch with the concept of *accident.* W h e n Kevin broke his arm, did I give you a hard time?

Did it have to be *somebody's fault?* N o . Shit happens."

" D o you want to talk to Kevin about Trent's bike?" I said."Or should I?"

" W h a t for? I can't see he's done anything."

I said under my breath. "You never do."

" A n d you always do," you said levelly.

A standard exchange—not even exceptionally acrimonious—so I ' m not sure w h y it flipped something in me, like Trent Corley's quick-release. Maybe because it *was* standard now, and once it hadn't been. I closed my eyes, cupping the back of the armchair that had walled off R o g e r Corley's outlandish accusations.

Honestly, I'd no idea what I was going to say until I said it.

"Franklin, I want to have another child."

I opened my eyes and blinked. I had surprised myself. It may have been my first experience of spontaneity in six or seven years.

You wheeled.Your response was spontaneous, too. "You *cannot* be *serious."*

T h e time didn't seem right for reminding you that you deplored J o h n M c E n r o e as a p o o r sport. "I'd like us to start trying to get me pregnant right away."

It was the oddest thing. I felt perfectly certain, and not in the fierce, clutching spirit that might have betrayed a crazy w h i m or frantic grab at a pat marital nostrum. I felt self-possessed and simple. This was the very unreserved resolve for which I had prayed during our protracted debate over parenthood, and whose absence had led us d o w n tortuously abstract avenues like "turning the page" and "answering the Big Question." I'd never been so sure of anything in my life, so m u c h so that I was disconcerted why you seemed to think there was anything to talk about.

"Eva, forget it. You re forty-four. You'd have a three-headed toad or something."

"Lots of w o m e n these days have children in their forties."

" G e t out of here! I thought that n o w Kevin's going to be in school full-time you were planning to go back to AWAP! W h a t about all those big plans to move into Eastern Europe post-glasnost? Get in early, beat *The Lonely PlanetV'*

"I've considered going back to AWAP. I may still go back. But I can work for the rest of my life. As you just observed with so m u c h sensitivity, there's only one thing I can do for a short while longer."

"I can't believe this. You're serious! You're seriously—serious!"

"I'd like to get pregnant makes a crummy gag, Franklin.Wouldn't you like Kevin to have someone to play with?" Truthfully, I wanted someone to play with, too.

"They're called *classmates.* And two siblings always hate each other."

" O n l y if they're close together. She'd be younger than Kevin by at least seven years."

"She, is it?"The pronoun made you bristle.

I shrugged my eyebrows. "Hypothetically."

"This is all because you want a *girl?* To dress in little outfits?

Eva, this isn't like you."

" N o , wanting to dress a girl in *little outfits* isn't like me. So there was no call for you to say that. Look, I can see your having reservations, but I don't understand w h y the prospect of my getting pregnant again seems to be making you so angry."

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Anything but. I thought you've enjoyed being a parent."

"I have, yes! Eva, what gives you the idea that even if you do have this fantasy daughter everything's going to be different?"

"I don't understand," I maintained, having learned the merits

of playing dumb from my son. " W h y in the world would I want everything to be different?"

"What could possess you, after it's gone the way it's gone, to want to do it again?"

"It's gone what way?" I asked neutrally.

You took a quick look out the window to make sure Kevin was still patting the tether ball to spiral first one way around the pole, then the other; he liked the monotony.

"You never want him to come with us, do you? You always want to find somebody to dump him with so we can waltz off by ourselves, like what you obviously consider the good old days."

"I don't remember saying any such thing," I said stonily.

"You don't have to. I can tell you're disappointed every time I suggest we do something so that Kevin can come, too."

"That must explain why you and I have spent coundess long, boozy evenings in expensive restaurants, while our son languishes with strangers."

"See?You resent it. And what about this summer?You wanted to go to Peru. Okay, I was game. But I assumed we'd take a vacation as a family. So I start supposing how far a six-year-old can hike in a day, and you should have seen your face, Eva. It fell like a lead balloon. Soon as Peru would involve

Kevin, too, you lose interest. Well, I'm sorry. But I for one didn't have a kid in order to get away from him as often as possible."

I was leery of where this was headed. I'd known that eventually we would need to discuss all that had been left unsaid, but I wasn't ready. I needed ballast. I needed supporting evidence, which would take me a minimum of nine months to gather.

"I'm with him all day," I said. "It makes sense that I'd be more anxious than you for a break—"

"And I never cease to hear about what a terrible sacrifice you've been making."

"I'm sorry that it means so litde to you."

"It's not important it mean something to me. It should mean something to him."

"Franklin, I don't understand w h e r e — "

" A n d that's typical isn't it? You stay *home for him* to *impress me*.

He just never enters in, does he?"

" Where is all this coming from? I only wanted to tell you that I'd like us to have another baby, and for you to be happy about it, or at least start getting used to the idea."

"You pick on him," you said. W i t h another cautionary glance at the tether-ball court up the hill, you had an air of just getting started. "You blame him for everything that goes wrong around this house. *And* at his kindergarten.You've complained about the p o o r kid at every stage of the game. First he cries too much, then he's too quiet. He develops his o w n little language, and it's annoying. He doesn't play right—meaning the way

you did. He doesn't treat the toys you make h i m like m u s e u m pieces. He doesn't pat *you* on the back every time he learns to spell a n e w word, and since the whole neighborhood isn't clamoring to sign his dance card, you're determined to paint him as a pariah. He develops one, yes, serious psychological problem having to do with his toilet training—it's not that unusual, Eva, but it can be very painful for the kid—and you insist on interpreting it as some mean-spirited, personal contest between you and him.

I ' m relieved he seems to be over it, but with your attitude I ' m not surprised it lasted a long time. I do what I can to make up for your—and I ' m very sorry if this hurts your feelings, but I don't k n o w what else to call it—your coldness. But there's no substitute for a mother's love, and I am damned if I am going to let you freeze out another kid of mine."

I was stunned. "Franklin—"

"This discussion is *over.* I didn't enjoy saying all that, and I still hope things can get better. I k n o w you think you make an effort—well, maybe you do make what for you is an effort—but so far it's not enough. Let's all keep trying. —Hey, sport!" You swooped Kevin up as he sauntered in from the deck, raising him over your head as if posing for a Father's Day ad. "At the end of your tether?"

W h e n you set him down, he said, "I wrapped the ball around 843 times."

"That's terrific! I bet next time you'll be able to do it 844

times!"

You were trying to make an awkward transition after an argument that left me feeling run over by a truck, but I can't say I care for the Hollywood gaga that's expected of modern parents.

Kevin's own expression flickered with a suggestion of oh-brother.

"If I try really hard," he said, deadpan. "Isn't it great to have a goal?"

"Kevin." I called him over and stooped. "I'm afraid your friend Trent has had an accident. It's not too bad, and he'll be all right.

But maybe you and I could make him a get-well card—hke the one Grandma Sonya made you when you hurt your arm."

"Yeah, well," he said, moving away. " H e thinks he's so cool with that bike."

T h e AC must have been turned too high; I stood up and rubbed my arms. I didn't remember mentioning anything about a bicycle.

4

FEBRUARY 1 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

For some reason I imagine it will reassure you that I still get the *Times.* But I seem to have misplaced the grid I once imposed on it to determine what parts were worth reading. Famines and Hollywood divorces appear equally vital and equally trifling.

Arbitrarily, I either devour the paper soup to nuts, or I toss it smooth and cool on the stack by the door. H o w right I was, in those days; h o w easily the United States can get on without me.

For the last two weeks I've tossed them unread, for if m e m o r y serves, the earnest p o m p of presidential inaugurations left me cold even w h e n I had clear enthusiasms and aversions.

Capriciously, this m o r n i n g I read everything, including an article about American workers' excessive overtime—and perhaps it *is* interesting, though I couldn't say, that the Land of the Free prefers work to play. I read about a young electrical lineman w h o would soon have been married, and w h o in his eagerness to salt away funds for his family-to-be had slept only five hours in two and a half days. He had been climbing up and d o w n poles for twenty-four hours straight:

Taking a break for breakfast on Sunday morning, he got yet another call.

At about noon, he climbed a 30-foot pole, hooked on his safety straps and reached for a 7,200-volt cable without

first putting on his insulating gloves. There was a flash, and Mr. Churchill was hanging motionless by his straps. His father, arriving before the ladder-truck did and thinking his son might still be alive, stood at the foot of the pole for more than an hour begging for somebody to bring his boy down.

I have no strong feelings about overtime; I ' m acquainted with no electrical linemen. I only k n o w that this image—of a father pleading with onlookers themselves as powerless as he, while his hardworking son creaked in the

breeze like a hanged m a n — m a d e me cry. Fathers and sons? Grief and misspent diligence? There are connections. But I also wept for that young man's real father.

You see, it was drilled into me since I could talk that 1.5

million of my people were slaughtered by Turks; my own father was killed in a war against the worst of ourselves, and in the very m o n t h I was born, we were driven to use the worst of ourselves to defeat it. Since *Thursday* was the slimy garnish on this feast of snakes, I wouldn't be surprised to find myself hard of heart. Instead, I ' m easily moved, even mawkish. Maybe my expectations of my fellows have been reduced to so base a level that the smallest kindness overwhelms me for being, like *Thursday* itself, so unnecessary. Holocausts do not amaze me. Rapes and child slavery do not amaze me. And Franklin, I k n o w you feel otherwise, but Kevin does not amaze me. I am amazed w h e n I drop a glove in the street and a teenager runs two blocks to return it. I am amazed w h e n a checkout girl flashes me a wide smile with my change, though my own face had been a mask of expedience. Lost wallets posted to their owners, strangers w h o furnish meticulous directions, neighbors w h o water each other's houseplants—these things amaze me. Celia amazed me.

As you instructed, I never raised the matter again. A n d I t o o k no relish in deceiving you. But the eerie certainty that descended in August never lifted, and you'd left me no choice.

Kevin's cast had been removed two weeks earlier, but it was as of Trent Corley's bike accident that I stopped feeling guilty.

Just like that. There was no equivalence between what I had done and what I would do—it was totally irrational—but still I seemed to have arrived at the perfect antidote or penance. I would put myself to the test. I was not at all sure that I would pass a second sitting.

You did notice I'd become "a horny little beastie," and you seemed glad of a desire that, though we never alluded to the abatement outright, had sadly

ebbed. With one or the other of us yawning theatrically before bed "a litde beat," we had slid from having sex almost nightly to the American average of once a week. My rekindled passion was no contrivance. I did want you, more urgently than in years, and the more we made love the more insatiable I felt during the day, unable to sit still, rubbing my inside thigh with a pencil at my desk. I, too, was glad of evidence that we had not yet sunk irretrievably into the mechanical bedtime rut that drives so many spouses to the arms of strangers at lunch.

For ever since we'd had a little boy sleeping down the hall, you'd so turned down the volume in bed that I had often to interrupt, "What?...Sorry?" Talking dirty by semaphore was too much effort, and at length we'd both withdrawn to private sexual Imax. Unembellished by your improvisations—and you had a gift for depravity; what a shame to let such talent lie fallow—my own fantasies had come to bore me, and I'd given over to floating pictures instead, rarely erotic in any literal sense, and always dominated by a certain texture and hue. But over time the visions had grown corrosive, like close-ups of a scab or geological illustrations of dried magma. O t h e r nights I'd been afflicted by flashes of fdthy diapers and taut, undescended testicles, so you can understand why I might have contributed to reducing our schedule to once a week. Perhaps worst of all, the vibrant scarlets and ceruleans that once permeated my head w h e n we made love in our childless days had gradually muddied and lost their luster, until the miasma on the inside of my eyelids c h u r n e d with the furious pitch and u m b e r of the drawings on o u r refrigerator door.

O n c e I started leaving my diaphragm in its sky-blue case, the vista in my m i n d during sex went light/Where my visual perimeters had once closed in, n o w I saw great distances, as if gazing from M t . Ararat or skimming the Pacific in a glider. I peered d o w n long hallways that shimmered endlessly to the vanishing point, their marble parquet blazing, sunlight pouring in windows from either side. Everything I envisioned was bright: wedding dresses, cloudscapes, fields of edelweiss. Please don't laugh at m e — I k n o w what I ' m describing sounds like a tampon commercial. But it was beautiful. I felt, at last, transported. My m i n d opened up, where b e -

fore my head had seemed to be spelunking into an ever narrower, more dimly lit hole. These wide-screen projections weren't mushy soft-focus, either, but sharp and vivid and I remembered t h e m w h e n we were through. I slept like a baby. Rather, like *some* babies, as I was soon to discover.

I was obviously not at my most fertile, and it did take a year.

B u t w h e n I finally missed a period the following fall, I started to sing. N o t show tunes this time, b u t the A r m e n i a n folk songs with w h i c h my m o t h e r had serenaded Giles and me w h e n she tucked us in for the night—like " S o o d e S o o d e " ("It's a lie, it's a lie, it's a lie, everything's a lie; in this world, everything's a lie!").

W h e n I discovered that I'd forgotten some of the words, I called her and asked if she might write t h e m out. She was delighted to oblige, since as far as M o t h e r knew, I was still the willful little girl w h o decried her A r m e n i a n lessons as burdensome extra h o m e w o r k , and she inscribed my favorites—Komitas Vardapet's

"Kele Kele,""Kujn Ara," a n d " G n a Gna"—inside greeting cards p e n - a n d - i n k e d with m o u n t a i n village scenes and patterns f r o m A r m e n i a n carpets.

Kevin noticed my transformation, and while he mightn't have savored his m o t h e r groveling about the house like a w o r m , he was no better pleased w h e n she burst her cocoon as a butterfly.

He h u n g back sullenly and carped, "You sing out of t u n e " or

commanded, reciting a line he had picked up from his multiethnic primary school, " W h y don't you speak *English*." I told h i m lighdy that Armenian folk songs were *polyphonic*, and w h e n he pretended to understand, I asked if he k n e w what that meant.

"It means stupid," he said. I volunteered to teach him a song or two, reminding him, "You're Armenian, too, you know," but he differed. " I ' m *American,*" he asserted, using the derisive tone of stating the obvious, like " I ' m a person" and not an aardvark.

Something was up. M o m m e r wasn't slumping and shuffling and talking in a peewee voice anymore, yet even pre-broken-arm M o m m e r had not made a reappearance: the brisk, rather formal w o m a n w h o marched through the paces of m o t h e r h o o d hke a soldier on parade. N o , this M o m m e r purled about her duties like a bubbling brook, and any number of stones hurled at her eddies sank with a harmless rattle to her bed. Apprised that her son thought all his second-grade classmates were "retards" and everything they studied he " k n e w already," this M o m m e r didn't remonstrate that he would *soon find out he didn't know everything;* she didn't abjure h i m not to say *retard.* She just laughed.

Although an alarmist by nature, I didn't even get bent out of shape about the escalating threats issuing from the State Department over Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. "You're usually so dramatic about these things," you remarked in November. "Aren't you *worried*?" N o , I wasn't worried. A b o u t anything.

It was after I'd missed my third cycle that Kevin started accusing me of getting fat. He'd poke at my stomach and jeer,

"You're *giant!"* C o m m o n l y vain about my figure, I concurred cheerfully, "That's right, Mommer's a big pig."

"You know, you may have gained just a bit around the waist,"

you remarked finally one night in December. "Maybe we should take it easy on the spuds, huh? Could stand to drop a couple pounds myself."

" M m m , " I h u m m e d , and I practically had to put my fist in my m o u t h to keep from laughing. "I don't m i n d a little extra weight.

All the better for throwing it around."

"Jesus, what's this, *maturity*? Usually if I suggest you've gained an ounce you go ape-shit!"You brushed your teeth, then joined me in bed. You picked up your mystery but only d r u m m e d the cover, sidling your other hand to a swollen breast. "Maybe you're right," you murmured. "A little m o r e Eva is pretty sexy."

Slipping the b o o k to the floor, you turned toward me and lifted an eyebrow. "Is it in?"

" M m m , " I h u m m e d again, with an affirmative cast.

"Your nipples are big," you observed, nuzzling. " T i m e for your period? Seems like it's been a while."

Your head stilled between my breasts. You pulled back. You looked me in the eye with the soberest of expressions. A n d then you turned white.

My heart sank. I could tell that it would be worse than I'd led myself to believe.

" W h e n were you planning to tell me?" you asked stonily.

"Soon. Weeks ago, really. It just never seemed the right time."

"I can see why it wouldn't," you said. "You expecting to palm this off as some kind of accident?"

" N o . It wasn't an accident."

"I thought we discussed this."

"That's what we didn't do, discuss it Y o u went on a tirade.You wouldn't listen."

"So you just go ahead and—a fait accompli—just—like some kind of mugging. As if it has nothing to do with me."

"It has everything to do with you. But I was right and you were wrong." I faced you squarely. As you would say, there were two of us and one of you.

"This is the most presumptuous...arrogant thing you've ever done."

"Yes. I guess it is."

" N o w that it *no longer matters* w h a t I think, you going to explain what this is about? I ' m listening." You didn't look as if you were listening.

"I have to find something out."

"What's that? H o w far you can push me before I push back?"

"About—," I decided not to apologize for the word, "about my soul."

"Is there anyone else in your universe?"

I bowed my head. "I'd like there to be."

" W h a t about Kevin?"

"What about him."

"It's going to be hard for him."

"I read somewhere that other children have brothers and sisters."

"Don't be snide, Eva. He's used to undivided attention."

"Another way of saying he's spoiled. Or could get that way.

This is the best thing that could possibly happen to that boy."

"Little bird tells me that's not the way he's going to look at it."

I took a moment to reflect that in five minutes we were already dwelling on our son. "Maybe it will be good for you, too.

For us."

"It's an agony aunt standard. Stupidest thing you can ever do to cement a shaky marriage is to have a baby."

"Is our marriage shaky?"

"You just shook it," you fired back, and turned away from me on your side.

I switched off the light and shd down on the pillow. We weren't touching. I started to cry. Feeling your arms around me was such a relief that I cried harder still.

"Hey," you said. "Did you really think—? Did you wait so long to tell me so it would be too late? Did you really think I'd ask you to do that? With our own kid?"

" O f course not," I snuffled.

But when I'd calmed down you grew sterner. "Look, I'll come around to this if only because I have to. But you're forty-five, Eva.

Promise me you'll get that test."

There was a purpose to "that test" only if we were prepared to act on a discouraging outcome. W i t h *our own kid.* Little w o n d e r that I put off telling you for as long as possible.

I didn't get the test. O h , I told you I did, and the n e w gynecologist I f o u n d — w h o was lovely—offered, but unlike Dr. Rhinestein, she did not seem to regard all pregnant w o m e n as public property and didn't unduly press the point. She did say that she hoped I was prepared to love and care for whoever—she meant, whatever—came out. I said that I didn't think I was romantic about the rewards of raising a disabled child. But I was probably too strict about w h a t — a n d w h o m — I chose to love. So I wanted to trust.

For once, I said. To have blind faith in—I chose not to say *life* or *fate* or *God*-—myself.

There was never any doubt that our second child was mine.

Accordingly, you exhibited n o n e of the proprietary bossiness that tyrannized my pregnancy with Kevin. I carried my own groceries.

I drew no scowls over a glass of red wine, w h i c h I continued to p o u r myself in small, sensible amounts. I actually stepped up my exercise regime, including running and calisthenics and even a little squash. O u r understanding was no less clear for being tacit: W h a t I did with this b u m p was my business. I liked it that way.

Kevin had already sensed the presence of perfidy. He h u n g back from me more than ever, glaring from corners, sipping at a glass of juice as if tasting for arsenic, and poking so warily at anything I left him to eat, often dissecting it into its constituent parts spread equidistant around his plate; he might have been searching for shards of glass. He was secretive about his homework, w h i c h he protected like a prisoner encrypting his correspondence with details of savage abuse at the hands of his captors that he would smuggle to Amnesty International.

S o m e o n e had to tell him, and soon; I was starting to show. So I suggested that we take this opportunity to explain generally about sex.You were reluctant. Just say you're pregnant, you suggested. He doesn't have to k n o w h o w it got there. He's only seven. Shouldn't we preserve his innocence a little longer?

It's a pretty backward definition of innocence, I objected, that equates sexual ignorance w i t h f r e e d o m f r o m sin. A n d underes-timating your kid's sexual intelligence is the oldest mistake in the book.

Indeed. I had barely introduced the subject while making dinner w h e n Kevin interrupted impatiently, "Is this about fucking?"

It was true: They didn't make second-graders the way they used to. "Better to call it *sex,* Kevin. T h a t other word is going to offend some people."

"It's what everybody else calls it."

" D o you k n o w what it means?"

Rolling his eyes, Kevin recited, " T h e boy puts his peepee in the girl's doodoo."

I went through the stilted nonsense about "seeds" and "eggs"

that had persuaded me as a child that making love was something between planting potatoes and raising chickens. Kevin was no more than tolerant.

"I k n e w all that."

" W h a t a surprise," I muttered. " D o you have any questions?"

"No."

" N o t any? Because you can always ask me or D a d anything about boys and girls, or sex, or your o w n body that you don't understand."

"I thought you were going to tell me something *new,"* he said darkly, and left the room.

I felt strangely ashamed. I'd raised his expectations, then dashed t h e m . W h e n you asked how the talk had gone I said okay, I guess; and you asked if he'd seemed frightened or uncomfortable or confused, and I said actually he seemed *unimpressed.* You laughed, while I said dolefully, what's ever going to impress him if that doesn't?

Yet phase two of the Facts of Life was b o u n d to be the more difficult installment.

"Kevin," I began the following evening. " R e m e m b e r what we talked about last night? Sex? Well, M o m m e r and Daddy do that sometimes, too."

"What for."

"For one thing, so you could keep us company. But it might be nice for you to have some company, too. Haven't you ever wished you had someone right around the house to play with?"

"No."

I stooped to the play table where Kevin was systematically snapping each crayon of his Crayola 64 set into pieces. "Well, you *are* going to have some company. A little baby brother or sister.

And you might find out that you hke it."

He glared at me a long, sulky beat, though he didn't look especially surprised. "What if I don't like it."

"Then you'll get used to it."

"Just cause you get used to something doesn't mean you like it." He added, snapping the magenta, "You're used to me."

"Yes!" I said. "And in a few months we'll all get used to someone new!"

As a crayon piece gets shorter it's more difficult to break, and Kevin's fingers were now straining against one such obdurate stump. "You're going to be sorry."

Finally, it broke.

I tried to draw you into a discussion about names, but you were indifferent; by then the GulfWar had started, and it was impossible to distract you from C N N . W h e n Kevin slumped alongside you in the den, I noted that the boy stuff of generals and fighter pilots didn't captivate him any more than the A B C song, though he did show a precocious appreciation for the nature of a "nuclar bomb." Impatient with the slow pace of made-for-TV combat, he grumbled, "I don't see why Cone Power bothers with all that little junk, Dad. Nuke 'em. That'd teach the Raqis who's boss."

You thought it was adorable.

In the spirit of fair play, I reminded you of our old pact, offering to christen our second child a Plaskett. Don't be ridiculous, you

dismissed, not taking your eyes off an incoming Patriot missile.

Two kids, different last names? People would think o n e was adopted. As for Christian names, you were equally apathetic.

Whatever you want, Eva, you said with a flap of your hand, is fine with me.

So for a boy I proposed *Frank.* For a girl, I deliberately rejected *Karru* or *Sophia* from my mother's vanquished clan and reached for the vanquished in yours.

T h e death of your Aunt Celia,your mother's childless younger sister, had hit you hard w h e n you were twelve. A frequent visitor, zany A u n t Celia had a playful taste for the occult; she gave you a magic eight ball that told fortunes and led you and your sister in darkened seances, the more delicious for your parents' disapproval.

I'd seen her picture, and she'd been heartbreakingly not-quite-pretty, with a wide m o u t h and thin lips but piercing, clairvoyant eyes, at once brave and a little frightened. Like me, she was adventurous, and she died young and unmarried after climbing Mt. Washington with a dashing young climber for w h o m she had high hopes, succumbing to hypothermia after their party was hit by a freak snowstorm. But you shrugged off the tribute with irritation, as if I were seeking to ensnare you by your A u n t Celia s o w n supernatural means.

My second confinement felt vasdy less restrictive than the first, and with Kevin in second grade, I could involve myself more fully in AWAP. Yet

with child I also felt less lonely, and w h e n I spoke aloud with you scouting and Kevin in school, I did not feel that I was talking to myself.

Of course, the second time around is always easier. I k n e w enough to opt for anesthesia, though w h e n the time came, Celia would prove so tiny that I probably could have managed without.

I also k n e w better than to expect a blinding Vulcan mind-meld at her birth. A baby is a baby, each miraculous in its way, but to demand transformation on the instant of delivery was to place too great a burden on a small confused bundle and an exhausted middle-aged m o t h e r both. All the same, w h e n she begged to arrive two weeks early on June 14,1 couldn't resist inferring an eagerness on her part, as I had once inferred a corresponding reluctance from Kevin's foot-dragging fortnight's delay Do babies have feelings, even at zero hour? From my modest study of two, I believe they do.They don't have names for feelings yet, and without separating labels probably experience emotion in a goulash that easily accommodates opposites; I am likely to pin myself to feeling *anxious,* while an infant might have no trouble feeling simultaneously apprehensive and relaxed. Still, on the birth of b o t h my children, I could immediately discern a dominant emotional tone, like the top note of a chord or the foreground color of a canvas. In Kevin, the note was the shrill high pitch of a rape whisde, the color was a pulsing, aortal red, and the feeling was fury. T h e shriek and p u m p of all that rage was unsustainable, so as he grew older the note would descend to the uninflected blare of a leaned-on car horn; the paint in his foreground would gradually thicken, its hue coagulating to the sluggish black-purple of liver, and his prevailing emotion would subside from fitful wrath to steady, unabating resentment.

Yet w h e n Celia slid to hand, she may have been visually beet-faced and bloody, but her aural color was light blue. I was overcome by the same clear-skied azure that had visited me w h e n we made love. She didn't cry w h e n she was b o r n , and if she emitted a figurative sound it was the quiet, meandering tune of a rambler far from h o m e w h o is enjoying the walk and doesn't think anyone is listening. As for the ascendant emotion that exuded from this blind creature—her hands not grasping at the air but

wandering, wondering at it, her m o u t h , once led to the nipple, suckling right away—it was *gratitude.*

I ' m not sure if you could tell the difference instantly, t h o u g h once Celia was fed, tied off, swabbed, and handed over to her father, you did return her rather quickly. Maybe you were still irked at my presumption, and maybe your n e w daughter's perfection dismayed you further, as living evidence that my deception had b e e n righteous. In any case, the years ahead

w o u l d later confirm my initial intuition: that you could tell the difference, and that the difference m a d e you angry. I imagine you bristling with a similar resistance if, after living for years in o u r fatally middlebrow D r e a m H o m e , you walked into the Victorian one with the porch swing, dumbwaiter, and mahogany balustrade and learned it was for sale. You'd wish you'd never seen it, and something in you w o u l d hate it a bit. On tramping back into our hackneyed cathedral of teak, the scales w o u l d fall f r o m your eyes, and you'd see only a slag heap of pretensions, your brave capacity for *rounding up* crippled for life.

That's my only explanation for your coolness, since you seemed so leery of picking her up and anxious to avoid looking at her with those long soulful gazes during which Brian claimed that a parent *falls in love.* I think she frightened you. I think you regarded your attraction to your daughter as a betrayal.

T h e birth went so smoothly that I only spent the one night, and you brought Kevin with you to retrieve us from Nyack Hospital. I was nervous, having every appreciation for h o w infuriating it must be for a firstborn chdd to contemplate the invasion of his patch by a speechless weakling. But w h e n Kevin trailed into the hospital r o o m behind you, he hardly leaped onto the bed to smother my suckling daughter with a pillow. Wearing an " I ' m the Big Brother" T-shirt with a smiley face in the O—its fresh squared creases and price tag in the neck betokening your purchase of a last-minute prop from the lobby's gift shop—he slouched around the foot, sauntered to

the other side, dragged a zinnia from your bedside bouquet, and set about denuding the flower of petals. Perhaps the safest outcome was that Celia should simply bore him.

"Kevin," I said. "Would you like to m e e t your sister?"

" W h y should I *meet* it," he said wearily. "It's coming h o m e with us, isn't it. That means I'll *meet* it every day."

"So you should at least k n o w her name, shouldn't you?" I gendy pulled the baby away from the breast in which Kevin himself had once shown such resolute disinterest, though she'd

just started feeding. In that event, most infants would squall, but from the start Celia took deprivation as her due, receiving whatever trifle she was offered with wide-eyed abashment. I tugged up the sheet and held out the baby for inspection.

"This is Celia, Kevin. I k n o w she's not a lot of f u n yet, but w h e n she gets a little bigger I bet she'll be your best friend." I wondered if he k n e w what one was. He'd yet to bring a classmate h o m e from school.

"You mean she'll tag along after me and stuff. I've seen it. It's a pain."

You clapped your hands on Kevin's shoulders from behind and rocked h i m in a pally motion. Kevin's face twitched. "Yeah, well, that's all part of being a big brother!" you said. "I should know, because I had a little sister, too.They never leave you alone!

You want to play with trucks, and they're always pestering you to play with doll babies!"

"I played with trucks," I objected, shooting you a look; we would have to talk about this retrograde sex-role crap w h e n we got home. It was a shame that, b o r n back-to-back, you and your sister Valerie—a prissy girl grown

officious woman, consumed by the cut of her drapes, and on our brief visits to Philadelphia determined to organize "outings" to historical homes—were never very close. "There's no telling w h a t Ceha will like to do, any more than you can tell if Kevin may like to play with dolls."

"In a pig's eye!" you cried fraternally.

"Teenage Mutant Ninja Turdes? Spiderman? Action figures are *dolls."*

"Great, Eva," you muttered. "Give the litde guy a complex."

Meantime, Kevin had sidled closer to the bed and dipped his hand into the glass of water on the bedside table. Eyeing the baby askance, he held his wet hand over her face and let drops of water drip, drip onto her face. Celia twisted, disconcerted, but the baptism didn't seem to be upsetting her, though I would later learn to regard the fact that my daughter hadn't complained or cried out as meaningless. His face stirring with a rare if clinical

curiosity, Kevin wet his hand again and spattered his sister's nose and m o u t h . I wasn't sure what to do. Kevin's christening reminded me of fairy tales in which an aggrieved relative arrives to curse the princess in her crib.Yet he wasn't really hurting her, and I didn't want to taint this introduction with a reprimand. So w h e n he dipped his hand a third time, I resettled myself on the pillow and, dabbing her face with the sheet, discreedy withdrew the baby out of his reach.

"Hey, Kev!" You rubbed your hands. "Your m o t h e r has to get dressed, so let's go find something *really greasy* and *really salty* in those machines d o w n the hall!"

W h e n we left the hospital together, you said I must be shot after being up and down all night with a n e w b o r n and volunteered to baby-sit while I got some sleep.

" N o , it's the oddest thing," I whispered. "I did get up a couple of times for feeding, but I had to set an alarm. Franklin—she doesn't cry."

" H u h . Well, don't expect that to last."

"You never know—they're all different."

"Babies ought to cry," you said vigorously "Kid just lolls in bed and sleeps all day, you're raising a doormat."

W h e n we came home, I noticed that the framed p h o t o of me in my late twenties that we kept on the little table in the foyer was missing, and I asked you if you'd moved it.You said no, shrugging, and I declined to pursue the matter, assuming it would t u r n up.

It didn't. I was a little perturbed; I no longer looked nearly that pretty, and these verifications that we were once lineless and lovely do grow precious. T h e shot had been snapped on an Amsterdam houseboat with whose captain I had a brief, uncomplicated affair.

I treasured the expression he'd captured—expansive, relaxed, warm; it fixed a simple glorying in all that I then required of life: light on water, bright white wine, a handsome man. T h e portrait had softened the severity that marked most of my pictures, with that shelved brow of mine, my deep-set eyes in shadow. T h e houseboat captain had mailed me the photo, and I didn't have

the negative. O h , well. Presumably, while I was in the hospital Kevin had snatched the print to poke pins in.

Anyway, I was in no mood to get exercised over one silly snapshot. In fact, though I fear that my martial metaphor may seem provocative, when I carried Celia over our threshold I had the exhilarating impression of having

reset our troop strengths at a healthy par. Little could I know that, as a military ally, a trusting young girl is worse than nothing, an open left flank.

FEBRUARY 1 8 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

You know, I was just thinking that I might have been able to handle everything— *Thursday,* the trials, even our separation—if only I'd been allowed to keep Celia. Nevertheless (and this may surprise you), I like picturing her with you, imagining the two of you together. I ' m glad if, at last, you may be getting to k n o w one another better. You were a good father to her—I don't mean to criticize—but you were always so sensitive about slighting Kevin that you may have overdone it, the reassurance that you were still on his side. You kept her a little at arm's length. And as she got older, she got so pretty, didn't she? In a tentative, bashful way, with that fine gold hair fluttering forever in her face. I think you resented it, on Kevin's behalf—how other people f o u n d her so enchanting, whereas with Kevin they tended to be wary and so overly hearty or false and sometimes visibly relieved w h e n we showed up at their house and hadn't brought h i m along. It wasn't fair, you thought. I suppose, in that big universal way, it wasn't.

Maybe my love for Celia was too easy. Maybe in my o w n terms she was a kind of cheating, since my w h o l e life I had striven to surmount difficulty, to overcome terrors. Celia was plainly lovable. I can't recall anyone w h o didn't find her sweet, though I w o n d e r if she stuck in the mind. Neighbors rarely liked Kevin, even if they were too polite to say so outright, but they r e m e m -

bered him. Both our families copped attitudes.Your sister Valerie 265

was always edgy about leaving Kevin unattended anywhere in her fastidiously decorated house and, just to check up on him, kept bringing our

son sandwiches he didn't want; whenever he picked up a candy dish or fiddled with the tassel of a tieback, she'd j u m p up and take it away. Well before Kevin's deficiencies became national news, whenever Giles asked after our son my brother seemed to be fishing for mean little stories to confirm a private prejudice. Kevin was hard to like, much less to love, but in this way he should have been perfectly fashioned for the likes of his mother. Kevin was hard to love in the same manner that it was hard to eat well in Moscow, find a cheap place to stay in London, or locate a commercial Laundromat in Bangkok. But I had moved back to the United States, grown soft. As I would sometimes cave to expedience and order takeout curries with a side of naan instead of simmering chicken in turmeric for hours on my stove, I chose the easy comfort of a compliant, ready-made child rather than break down the stringy fibers of a tough kid with long low heat. I had been rising to challenges for most of my hfe. I was tired, and, latterly, flabby; in a spiritual sense, I was out of shape.

But it is only natural for the current of emotion to follow the path of least resistance.To my amazement, when I put Celia down she slept; I guess we were indeed raising "a doormat." Whereas Kevin had screeched with every conceivable need met, Celia would submit to all manner of material deprivations with barely a mewl or stir, and she could pickle for hours in a wet diaper unless I remembered to check. She never wept out of hunger yet always took the breast, so I was obliged to feed her according to a fixed schedule. I may have been the first mother in history to despair that her baby didn't cry enough.

Kevin's disconsolate infancy had segued to wholesale boredom; Celia was entranced by the least bauble. Every bit as delighted with a scrap of colored tissue paper as with that expensive mother-of-pearl mobile over her crib, she displayed an indiscriminate fascination with the tactile universe that

would have driven your Madison Avenue masters to distraction.

Ironically for a girl so easy to please, it would grow difficult to buy her presents because she was so infatuated with the toys she had. As she got older she formed such passionate loyalties to tattered stuffed animals that the gift of plush, fresh-furred creatures seemed to throw her into turmoil—as if, like her second-time father, she feared that to enlarge her httle family was to imperil previous, more primitive commitments. T h e newer animals were only allowed in her bedtime embrace once they had proved themselves by losing an ear or had joined the fallible, mortal world with a baptismal stain of strained broccoli.

O n c e she could speak, she confided to me that she was careful to play with each member of the menagerie every day, lest one feel neglected or jealous. Her favorite, most fiercely defended toys were the ones that (thanks to Kevin) were broken.

It's possible that she was too m u c h of a girl-girl for you, and her feminine diffidence and delicacy were foreign to me as well. You might have preferred a boisterous, fearless tomboy w h o made you proud by conquering the summits of jungle gyms, arm-wrestling boys, and declaring to visitors that she planned to be an astronaut—a rough-and-tumble hellion w h o sauntered about the house in cowboy chaps covered in motor oil. I might have enjoyed that kind of girl, too, but that was not the daughter we got.

Instead, Celia loved to don lacy frocks and dab on the lipstick I rarely wore. But her girlishness wasn't limited to captivation with jewelry on my dresser, to wobbles in my high-heeled shoes.

It expressed itself in a larger weakness, dependency, and trust. She had so many lovely qualities, but she didn't have guts. She was full of terrors, and not only of the dark, but of the vacuum cleaner, the basement, and the drain. Eager to please, she began to use the potty well before the age of two but into kindergarten was still mortified by venturing into the bathroom by herself. She watched me open and throw out a moldy Columbo container once and for weeks thereafter would not come near the refrigerator, nor

touch any substance, like vanilla pudding or even white poster paint, that resembled yogurt. Like many children, she was supersensitive to texture; though tolerant of mud, she reviled what she called "drydirt," pronounced as one word: fine silty soil, dust on linoleum, even plain flour. The first time I taught her to roll a pie crust, she stood stricken in the middle of the kitchen with her floured hands held out from her side, fingers spread, eyes popped wide. Celia always expressed horror in silence.

As for food, it took me a while to discern what turned out to be fierce aversions. Loath to seem choosy, she would force herself to choke down whatever she was offered, unless I attended to her indrawn shoulders and stifled litde gags. She was revulsed by anything with "lumps" (tapioca, pumpernickel with raisins),

"slime" (okra, tomatoes, sauces thickened with cornstarch), or

"skin" (a rubbery bottom on Jell-O, the cooled brown surface on hot cocoa, even an unpeeled peach).While I was relieved to have a child with tastes at all—I might have fashioned Kevin's meals from colored wax—quaking before these comestibles, she grew so pale and moist that the food might have been poised to eat her. For Celia, her whole surround was animate, and each tapioca lump had a dense, nauseating little soul.

I know it was frustrating, always having to remember to leave the hall light on or getting up in the middle of the night to accompany her to the toilet. More than once you accused me of coddling her, since to indulge a fear was to feed it. But what was I to do on discovering a four-year-old trembling in the hall at 3 A.M., chilled in her nightie and clutching between her legs, but beg her to always, always wake one of us up if she needed to pee? Besides, Celia was frightened of so many different things that it's possible she was, in her own terms, courageous. Of what a variety of dreadful textures or murky corners might she have been terrified and quietly faced down by herself?

But I drew the line when you despaired that Celia was

"clingy." It's an ugly word, isn't it, that describes the honey of the heart as a sticky, pester-some substance that won't brush off. And

to whatever degree clinginess is not simply a mean appellation for the most precious thing on earth, it involves an unacceptably incessant demand for attention, approbation, ardor in return. But Celia beseeched us for nothing. She didn't nag us to come see what she'd built in the playroom or paw and tug at us while we tried to read. Whenever I hugged her unbidden, she returned my embrace with a thankful ferocity that implied unworthiness.

After I went back to working at AWAP, she never complained at my absence, though her face would turn ashen with grief w h e n I dropped her at preschool and would light like Christmas w h e n I came home.

Celia was not *clingy.* She was simply affectionate. She did sometimes wrap her arms around my leg in the kitchen, press her cheek to my knee, and exclaim with amazement, "You're my friend!'Yet whatever difficulty you may have had with her arrival, you were never so hard a man as to find such demonstrations anything but touching. Indeed, confirmation that we were her *friends* seemed to entrance her far more than broad, rather abstract protestations of parental love. Although I k n o w you thought Kevin the far smarter of the two, Kevin entered this world utterly stymied by what it was for and what to do with it, where Celia arrived with unshakable certainty about what she wanted and what made life worth living: that goo that wouldn't brush off.

Surely that constitutes intelligence of a kind.

All right, she didn't do well in school. But that's because she tried too hard. She became so caught up in wanting to get things right, so seized by the prospect of fading her parents and teachers, that she couldn't get down to the task itself. At least she didn't hold everything they tried to teach her in contempt.

I tried to drill into her: You just memorize that the capital of Florida is Tallahassee, period. As great a believer in mystery as her namesake, Celia couldn't imagine it was that simple, that there wasn't a magic trick, and she doubted herself, so that taking the state capitals test she would immediately question "Tallahassee"

for the very reason that it popped into her head. Kevin never had any trouble with mystery. He ascribed to the whole world the same terrifying plainness, and the question was never whether he was able to learn something, but whether to bother. Ceha's faith, as emphatic in relation to others as it was deficient in relation to herself, assured her that no one would ever insist that she study the manifesdy useless. Kevin's cynicism equally assured him that a malign, sadistic pedagogy would pitch him nothing but chaff.

I don't mean that Celia couldn't exasperate me as well. Like Kevin, she was impossible to punish, though there was rarely reason to punish her aside for something that, as it turned out, she didn't actually do. Still, she took the least admonition to heart, so that any remonstrance was hke killing a fly with a sledgehammer.

At the least suggestion that she had disappointed us, she was inconsolable, pouring out apologies before she was quite sure what we'd like her to regret. A single sharp word would send her into a tailspin, and I admit it would have been a relief once in a while to be able to bark out, "Celia, I told you to set the table!" (she was rarely disobedient, but she was absent-minded) and not have my daughter melt into a time-consuming puddle of remorse.

But my primary exasperation was otherwise. Judiciously applied, fear is a useful tool of self-protection. While the drain would hardly leap out and bite her, Celia was sufficiently replete with dread to have plenty left over for dangers that could. There was one thing in our house of which she might have been justifiably afraid, and she adored him.

On this point I'm brooking no argument, and I intend to take ruthless advantage of the fact that this is my account, to whose perspective you have no choice but to submit. I don't pretend to know the whole story, because I don't think that's a story that you or I will ever fully know. I remember

uneasily from my own childhood that on Enderby Avenue, where the alliance between my brother and me was far more fickle, Giles and I conducted the main of our lives below our mother's line of sight. O n e of us might run to her to argue our side (frowned

u p o n as cheating), but for the most part our collusions, battles, and mutually inflicted tortures took place, if not out of view, in code. So total was my own immersion in the world of other short people that my memories before about the age of twelve are largely depopulated of adults. Maybe it was different for you and Valerie, since you didn't like each other much. But many, perhaps most siblings share a private universe tropical with benevolence, betrayal, vendetta, reconciliation, and the use and abuse of power of w h i c h their parents k n o w practically nothing.

Still, I wasn't blind, and a measure of parental innocence is stark disinterest. If I walked into a playroom to find my daughter curled on her side, ankles tied with knee socks, hands b o u n d behind her back with her hair ribbon, m o u t h duct-taped shut, and my son nowhere in evidence, I could work out for myself what her whimpered explanation of "playing kidnapping" amounted to. I might not have been privy to the Masonic passwords of my children's secretive sect, but I did k n o w my daughter well enough to be confident that, despite her claims to the contrary, she would never hold the head of her favorite plastic horsey over the flame of the stove. And if she was alarmingly compliant about forcing d o w n foodstuffs I hadn't realized she couldn't abide, she was not an outright masochist. Thus w h e n I discovered her strapped into her booster chair at the dining table covered in vomit, I could reasonably assume that the bowl before her of mayonnaise, strawberry jam, Thai curry paste,Vaseline petroleum jelly, and *lumps* of balled up bread had not followed a recipe of her personal concoction.

You would assert, of course—since you did at the time—that older siblings traditionally torment younger ones, and Kevin's petty persecution remained within the range of the *perfectly normal.* You might n o w object that I can only find incidents of typical childhood cruelty in any way forbidding with

benefit of hindsight. Meanwhile, millions of children survive families rife with roughhouse bullying, often profitably the wiser about the Darwinian pecking orders they will negotiate as adults. Many

of these onetime tyrants develop into sensitive husbands w h o remember anniversaries, while their onetime victims grow into confident young w o m e n with high-flying careers and aggressive views on a woman's right to choose.Yet my present position offers few e n o u g h perquisites, and I *do* have the benefit of hindsight, Franklin, if *benefit* is the word.

As I shuttled to Chatham last weekend, I considered that I might also benefit from our shy, fragile daughter's example of Christian forgiveness. But Celia's baffling incapacity to hold a grudge from age zip seems to suggest that the ability to forgive is a gift of temperament, not necessarily a trick for old dogs. Besides, on my o w n account, I am not sure what "forgiving" Kevin entails.

Surely it doesn't involve sweeping *Thursday* artificially under the carpet or ceasing to hold him accountable, w h i c h couldn't be in his larger moral interests. I can't imagine that I ' m supposed to *get over it*, like hopping a low stone wall; if *Thursday* was a barrier of some kind, it was made of razor wire, which I did not b o u n d over but thrash through, leaving me in flayed pieces and on the other side of something only in a temporal sense. I can't pretend he didn't do it, I can't pretend I don't wish he hadn't, and if I have abandoned that felicitous parallel universe to w h i c h my white confederates in Claverack's waiting room are prone to cling, the rehnquishment of my private if-only derives more from a depleted imagination than any healthy reconcilement that what's done is done. Honestly, w h e n Carol Reeves formally

"forgave" our son on C N N for murdering her boy, Jeffrey, w h o was already precocious enough at the classical guitar to be courted by Juilliard, I had no idea what she talking about. H a d she built a box around Kevin in her head, knowing that only rage dwelled there; was our son n o w simply a

place her mind refused to go? At best, I reasoned that she had successfully depersonalized h i m into a regrettable natural p h e n o m e n o n that had descended on her family like a hurricane or opened a m a w in their living r o o m like an earthquake, concluding that there was nothing to be gained from railing at the likes of weather or tectonic plate shifts.

— 2 7 2 —

T h e n , there is nothing to be gained by railing in virtually every circumstance, and that doesn't stop most of us.

Celia, though. I can't imagine that Celia successfully boxed up or d e m o t e d to cloudburst the day that Kevin, w i t h the delicacy of a budding entomologist, removed a nest of bagworms from o u r white oak in the backyard and left t h e m to hatch in her backpack. Subsequently, she reached for her spelling b o o k in her first-grade class, withdrawing it covered in striped caterpillars—the kind that Kevin squished to green goo on our deck—several of w h i c h crawled o n t o her hand and up her rigored arm. Unfortunately, Celia wasn't given to screaming, w h i c h might have brought rescue more quickly. Instead I gather she seized up—breath whiffing, nostrils flaring, pupils dilating to saucers—and her teacher kept explaining the "hard C" in *candy* on the blackboard. Finally, the girls in adjacent desks began to shriek, and p a n d e m o n i u m ensued.

Yet however fresh the m e m o r y of those bagworms, the recollection simply didn't feature two weeks later w h e n Kevin offered her a "ride" on his back as he climbed the white oak, and she clasped his neck. No doubt she was surprised w h e n Kevin urged her off to perch tremulously on an upper branch, after which he climbed calmly to the ground. In fact, w h e n she puled,

"Kewin? Kewin, I can gedown!" she must have sincerely believed that, even after abandoning her twenty feet high and waltzing inside for a sandwich, he would return to help her out of the tree.

Is that forgiveness? Like Charlie Brown taking one m o r e running lunge at Lucy's football, no matter h o w many stuffed animals he eviscerated and Tinkertoy cathedrals he felled, Celia never lost faith that deep down inside her big brother was a nice guy.

You can call it innocence or you can call it gullibility, but Celia made the most c o m m o n mistake of the good-hearted: She assumed that everyone else was just like her. Evidence to the contrary found nowhere to lodge, like a b o o k on chaos theory in a library that didn't have a physics section. Meanwhile, she never told tales, and without a testimonial it was often impossible to

pin her misfortunes on her brother. As a consequence, from the m o m e n t his sister was born, Kevin Khatchadourian, figuratively at least, got away with murder.

I confess that during Ceha's early years, Kevin receded for me, taking two giant steps backward like Simon Says. Small children are absorbing, and he had meanwhile assumed a militant independence. A n d you were so good about taking him to ball games and museums in your spare time that I may have handed h i m off a bit. That put me in your debt, which is why I feel especially awkward about observing what, from those two giant steps away, became only more striking.

Franklin, our son was developing the personality equivalent of the black-and-white cookie. It started back in kindergarten if not before, but it kept getting worse. Exasperatingly, we're all pretty m u c h restricted to learning w h a t people are like w i t h the p e r m a n e n t c o n f o u n d of our o w n presence, w h i c h is w h y those chance glimpses of someone you love just walking d o w n the street can seem so precious. So you'll just have to take my w o r d for it—I k n o w you w o n ' t — t h a t w h e n you weren't h o m e , Kevin was sour, secretive, and sarcastic. N o t just once in a while, on a bad day. Every day was a bad day.This laconic, supercilious, u n f o r t h c

o m i n g persona of his did seem real. Maybe it wasn't the only thing that was real, but it didn't c o m e across as completely confected.

In contrast to—Franklin, I feel so lousy about this, as if I'm trying to take something away from you that you cherish—

Kevin's behavior around you. W h e n you walked in, his face changed. His eyebrows shot up, his head cocked, and he p u t on a closed-mouth smile high up on his chin, his hps meeting at his upper gum. Altogether, his features assumed the p e r m a n e n t expression of startled happiness that you see on aging starlets w h o have had too m u c h plastic surgery. *Hi Dad!* he'd cry. *How was work today, Dad? Did you take any pictures of some real cool stuff? Any more cows, Dad? Any more fields or big buildings or really*

loaded-people's houses? You'd light into an enthusiastic description of the sections of roadway you'd shot, and he'd enthuse, *Gosh, that's great! Another car ad! I'm gonna tell everybody at school that my dad takes pictures for Oldsmobile!* O n e night you brought h o m e a copy of the n e w *Atlantic Monthly,* flipping proudly to the Colgate advertisement that sponsored our very o w n pink-marbled master bath. *Gee, Dad!* Kevin exclaimed. *Since our bathroom is in a toothpaste ad, does that make us famous?* "Just a little famous," you allowed, and I swear I remember wising off,"To be really famous in this country, you've got to kill somebody."

O h , you were by no means uniquely credulous; Kevin pulled the wool over his teachers' eyes for years. I still have, thanks to you, stacks of his schoolwork. An amateur student of American history, you were the family chronicler, the photographer, the scrapbook paster, while I was more apt to regard experience itself as my souvenir. So I ' m not quite sure what possessed me to rescue, from among the Stairmasters and egg sheers I abandoned en masse w h e n I moved, the fde folders of Kevin's essays.

D i d I save the fdes just for your tight, slanted cursive, "First Grade"? For once, I think not. I have b e e n through t w o trials, if w h a t preceded t h e m is not to be considered a third, and I have learned to think in terms of evidence. Why, I've b e c o m e so accustomed to abdicating ownership of my life to other p e o p l e — t o journalists, judges, web-site writers; to the parents of dead children and to Kevin himself—that even n o w I ' m reluctant to fold or deface my son's essays lest it constitute actionable tampering.

Anyway, it's a Sunday afternoon, and I have been forcing myself to read a few. (Do you realize that I could sell these? I don't m e a n for spare change, either. Apparently this is just the kind of ephemera that gets auctioned on eBay for thousands, along with the passably competent landscapes of Adolph Hider.) Their innocent physical manifestation is disarming: the fat, characterless printing, the fragile yellowed paper. H o w prosaic, I thought at first; I'll learn nothing but that, like a good boy, he

did his homework. But as I read on, I grew more compelled, drawn in with the nervous fascination that leads one to poke and squeeze at an emerging cyst or a burrowing ingrown hair.

I've concluded that Kevin was prone to snow his

schoolmasters less with that scrubbed-behind-the-ears Partridge-family buoyancy with which he greeted your return from work than with an eerie lack of affect. Kevin's papers always follow the assignment excessively to the letter; he adds nothing, and whenever they are marked down, it is usually for being too short.

There is nothing wrong with them. They are factually correct.

Their spelling is accurate. On those rare occasions his teachers jot vague notes about how he might "take a more personal approach to the material," they are unable to pinpoint anything in his essays that is precisely lacking:

Abraham Lincoln was president. Abraham Lincoln had a beard. Abraham Lincoln freed the African-American slaves.

In school we study great African-American Americans for a whole month. There are many great African-American Americans. Last year we studied the same African-American Americans during African-American History Month. Next year we will study the same African-American Americans during African-American History Month. Abraham

Lincoln was shot.

If you don't mind my weighing in on Kevin's side for once, you and his teachers thought all through primary school that he needed help on his organizational skills, but I've decided that his organizational skills were razor sharp. From first grade on, those assignments demonstrate an intuitive appreciation for the arbitrary, for the numbing powers of repetition, and for the absurdist possibilities of the non sequitur. More, his robotic declaratives do not indicate a failure to master the niceties of prose style; they *are* his prose style, refined with all the fastidiousness that attended H. L. Mencken's. Uneasy intimations to us at parent-

teacher conferences that Kevin "didn't seem to put his heart into his schoolwork" to the contrary, Kevin *did* put his heart into his work, his heart and soul. Check out this fourth-grade rendition of the assignment, " M e e t My M o t h e r " : My m o t h e r goes somewhere else. My m o t h e r sleeps in a different bed. My mother eats different food. My m o t h e r comes home. My m o t h e r sleeps at home. My m o t h e r eats at home.

My m o t h e r tells other people to go somewhere else.

O t h e r people sleep in a different bed. O t h e r people eat different food. O t h e r people come h o m e . O t h e r people sleep at h o m e . O t h e r people eat at h o m e . My m o t h e r is rich.

I k n o w what you're thinking, or I k n o w what you thought then. That it was Kevin's surly, remote pose with me that was fake, while with you he could relax and be his sprightly, chipper self. That the pervasive stiltedness of his written w o r k revealed a commonplace gap between his thoughts and his powers of expression. I ' m willing to grant that his closed condescension toward me was an artifice, even if its *hiding-time* quality, tracing back to my appropriation of his squirt gun, felt true. But neither the Beaver Cleaver nor the w i n d u p schoolboy straight man was any less bogus. Kevin was a shell game in which all three cups were empty.

I just glanced over what I've written so far and realized that I was being awfully summary about a solid seven years of our lives together; moreover, that the abundance of that summary concerned Ceha. I ' m ashamed of this, I really am, but w h d e I can remember h o w we spent every one of Ceha's birthdays during those years, my memories of Kevin from the age of eight to about fourteen tend to blur.

O h , a few bits and pieces stick out, especially my disastrous attempt to impart the enthusiasms of my professional life by taking you and thirteen-year-old Kevin (you'll recall that Ceha, too young, stayed with my mother) to Vietnam. I deliberately chose that country because it's a place that to any American, at least of our generation, inescapably means something, saving it from the dissociated Just Somewhere Else and W h o Cares feeling that foreign countries so easily induce w h e n you visit them for the first time, and to which Kevin would naturally fall prey. Too, Vietnam had only recently opened up to tourism, so I couldn't resist the opportunity on my own account. But I grant that this sense of connectedness, of guilty intimacy with rice paddies and wizened old women in conical straw hats, would pertain mostly to you and me. I'd marched on Washington in my twenties, while you had actually begged the Draft Board, if to no avail, not to reject you because of flat feet; with Saigon already fallen three years before, we had some bracing knockdown drag-outs over the war when we met. Kevin had no such associations, so maybe despite my intentions to the contrary, I had indeed dragged him to Just Somewhere Else and W h o Cares. Nonetheless, I'll never forget my stinging humiliation when our son —if nothing else, ever a quick study—sauntered through the sea of scooters in Hanoi telling the "gooks" to get out of the way.

However, one other memory rises eidetically above the blur, and it is not, Franklin, one more mean, slanderous example of how our son was heartless from birth.

I refer to that two weeks when he got so sick. He was ten.

For a while, Dr. Goldblatt worried that it was meningitis, though an excruciating spinal tap only proved that it wasn't. Despite his poor appetite, Kevin was generally a healthy boy, and this was my only experience of our son laid so low for so long.

W h e n he first started coming down with it, I noticed that the spirit in which he turned up his nose at my meals was no longer sneering; he'd look at his plate and slump, as if in defeat. In fact, since he was accustomed—hke his mother—to battling his own impulses as much as outside forces, he struggled to stuff down one

of my lamb *sarma* before giving up. He didn't lurk in shadows or march martinet-style d o w n the hall but began to wander, sagging against furniture. T h e rigid set of his face went limp and lost that smirking sideways skew. Eventually I found h i m curled helplessly on my study's ink-stained Armenian carpet, and I was astonished that w h e n I helped h i m up and lifted h i m to b e d that he offered no resistance. Franklin, he *put his arms around my neck.*

In his bedroom, he let me undress him, and w h e n I solicited w h i c h pajamas he wanted to wear, rather than roll his eyes and say *I don't care,* he thought for a m o m e n t and then whispered in a small voice,"The spaceman ones. I like the monkey in the rocket."

This was the first I'd heard that he *liked* a single garment in his possession, and w h e n I discovered this was the one pair in the laundry hamper, I was distraught, shaking them out and hurrying back to promise that the next day I w o u l d wash t h e m to be nice and fresh. I expected, " D o n ' t *bother*,"

but instead got—another first—"Thanks."When I tucked him in, he huddled gladly with the blanket to his chin, and w h e n I slipped the t h e r m o m e t e r between his flushed hps— his face had a bright febrile blotch—he suckled the glass with gende rhythmic contractions, as if finally, at the age of ten, having learned to nurse. His fever was high for a child—over 101°—and w h e n I stroked his forehead with a moist washcloth, he h u m m e d .

I cannot say whether we are less ourselves w h e n we are sick, or more. But I did find that remarkable two-week period a revelation.

W h e n I sat on the edge of his bed, Kevin would nestle his crown against my thigh; once I became convinced that it wouldn't be pushing my luck, I pulled his head onto my lap and he clutched my sweater. A couple of times w h e n he threw up he didn't make it to the toilet; yet w h e n I cleaned up the mess and told him not to worry, he exhibited none of the self-satisfied complacency of his diaper-changing phase but whimpered that he was sorry and seemed, despite my reassurances, ashamed. I k n o w that we all transform one way or another w h e n we're ill, but Kevin wasn't just cranky or tired, he was a completely different person. A n d that's h o w I achieved an appreciation for h o w m u c h energy and commitment it must have taken him the rest of the time to generate this other boy (or boys). Even you had conceded that Kevin was

"a little antagonistic" toward his sister, but w h e n our two-year-old tiptoed into his bedroom, he let her pet his head with damp litde pats. W h e n she offered him her get-well drawings, he didn't dismiss them as d u m b or take advantage of feeling bad to tell her, as was well within his rights, to leave him alone, instead exerting himself to say weakly, "That's a nice picture, Celie.Why don't you draw me another one?" I had thought that dominant emotional tone of his, so extravagant from birth, was immutable. Call it rage or resentment, it was only a matter of degree. B u t underneath the levels of fury, I was astonished to discover, lay a carpet of despair.

He wasn't mad. He was sad.

T h e other thing that amazed me was his curious aversion to your company.You may not remember, since after he'd rebuffed you once or twice—imploring w h e n you popped in that he'd like to go to sleep or

laying your present of rare collectible comics silendy, wearily on the floor — you were injured enough to withdraw. Maybe he felt unable to muster the *Gee, Dad* boisterousness of your Saturday afternoon Frisbee tosses, but in that instance he clearly regarded this rah-rah boy m o d e as compulsory with his father. I comforted you that children always prefer their mothers w h e n they're sick, but you were still a litde jealous. Kevin was breaking the rules, ruining the balance. Celia was mine, and Kevin was yours. You and Kevin were *close*, he would *confide in you*, and *lean on you* in times of trouble. But I think that was the very reason he recoiled: your insistence, your crowding, your wanting, your cajoling, c h u m m y Daddishness.

It was too much. He didn't have the energy—not to give you the intimacy you demanded, but to resist it. Kevin made himself up for you, and there must have been, in the very lavishness of his fabrication, a deep and aching desire to please. But do you ever consider h o w disappointed he must have been w h e n you accepted the decoy as the real thing?

— 2 8 0 —

T h e second industry he could no longer afford was the manufacture of apathy—though you'd think that apathy would c o m e naturally in a state of malaise. Instead, little islands of shy desire began to emerge like bumps of sun-warmed dry land in a cold receding sea. O n c e he was holding d o w n food, I asked w h a t he'd like to eat, and he confessed that he hked my clam chowder, going so far as to assert that he preferred the milk-based to the tomato. He even requested a toasted slice of *katah*, whereas he had previously gone out of his way to disdain anything Armenian. He confessed to a fancy for one of Ceha's ragged stuffed animals (the gorilla), w h i c h she donated solemnly to his pillow as if her humble primate had been selected for a rare honor—as indeed it had been. W h e n I asked him w h a t I should read to him on the long afternoons—I had taken time off from AWAP, of course—he was a bit at a loss, but I think that was only because w h e n either of us had read stories before he had refused to listen.

So just on a h u n c h — i t seemed an appealing tale for a boy—I picked *Robin Hood and His Merry Men.*

He loved it. He implored me to read *Robin Hood* over and over, until he must have committed whole passages to heart.To this day I will never k n o w w h e t h e r this particular tale took so because I read it at some perfect chemical p o i n t — w h e r e he was strong enough to pay attention but still too weak to generate a force field of indifference—or whether there was something about the nature of this one story that captured his imagination. Like many children foisted into the headlong march of civilization w h e n it was already well d o w n the road, he may have found comfort in the trappings of a world whose workings he could understand; horse-drawn carts and bows and arrows are pleasantly fathomable to the ten-year-old. Perhaps he liked stealing from the rich and giving to the poor because he had an instinctive appreciation for the anti-hero. (Or, as you quipped at the time, maybe he was just a budding tax-and-spend Democrat.)

If I will never forget those two weeks, as indehble was the m o r n i n g that he felt well enough to get out of bed, informing

me that he would dress himself and would I please leave the room. I obliged, trying to hide my disappointment, and w h e n I returned later to ask what he'd like for lunch, maybe clam chowder again, he jerked his head in annoyance. "Whatever," he said, his generation's watchword. A grilled cheese sandwich?—-"I don't give a *rat's ass"* he said—a phrase that, whatever they say about kids growing up fast these days, still took me aback from a child of ten. I withdrew, though not before noticing that the set of his m o u t h was once more askew. I told myself I should be pleased; he was better. *Better*? Well, not to me.

Yet his fever had never burned quite high enough to sear the seeds of a tiny, nascent *interest* to ash. I caught h i m the following week, reading *Robin Hood* to himself. Later, I helped you two buy his first bow-and-arrow set at the sporting goods store at the mall and construct the archery range at the crest of our sloping backyard, praying all the while that this litde b l o o m of rapture in our firstborn would endure the length of the project. I was all for it.

A

— 2 8 2 —

FEBRUARY 2 4 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

W h e n I saw Kevin today his left cheek was bruised, his lower lip swollen; his knuckles were scabbed. I asked if he was all right and he said he cut himself shaving. Maybe the lamest remarks pass for drollery w h e n you're locked up. It gave h i m palpable pleasure to deny me access to his travails inside, and w h o am I to interfere with his few enjoyments; I didn't press the matter. Afterward, I might have complained to the prison authorities about their failure to protect our son, but considering what Kevin has himself inflicted on his peers, objection to a few scrapes in return seemed worse than petulant.

I dropped any further preliminaries. I ' m increasingly indifferent to setting h i m at ease on my visits w h e n his o w n efforts are aimed solely at my discomfiture.

"It's been preying on me," I said right off. "I can almost understand going on some indiscriminate frenzy, venting your frustrations on whomever happens to be in the way. Like that quiet, unassuming Hawaiian a year or two ago, w h o just flipped—"

"Bryan Uyesugi," Kevin provided. " H e kept fish."

"Seven coworkers?"

Kevin patted his hands in m o c k applause."Two thousand fish.

A n d it was Xerox. He was a copy-machine repairman. N i n e -

millimeter Glock."

" I ' m so pleased," I said,"that this experience has afforded you an expertise."

" H e lived on 'Easy Street,'" Kevin noted. "It was a dead-end."

" M y point is, U y o o g h i — "

"Yoo-SOO-ghee," Kevin corrected.

"It clearly didn't matter w h o those employees w e r e — "

" G u y was a m e m b e r of the Hawaiian Carp Association. Maybe he thought that meant he was supposed to complain."

Kevin was showing off; I waited to make sure the little recital was over.

"But your get-together in the gym," I resumed, "was By Invitation Only."

"All my *colleagues* aren't indiscriminate. Take Michael M c D e r m o t t , last December. Wakefield, Mass., EdgewaterTech—

AK, ,12-gauge shotgun. Specific targets. Accountants. Anybody had to do with docking his paycheck 2,000 b u c k s — "

"I don't want to talk about Michael M c D e r m o t t , K e v i n — "

" H e was fat."

"—Or about Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold—"

"Morons. Give mass murderers a bad name."

I told you, Franklin, he's obsessed with those Columbine kids, w h o upstaged him only twelve days later with six more fatalities; I ' m sure I brought them up just to rile him. "At least Harris and Klebold had the

courtesy to save the taxpayer a bundle and make a quick exit," I observed coolly.

"Weenies just trying to inflate their casualty figures."

" W h y didn't you?"

He didn't seem to take offense. " W h y make it easy for everybody."

"Everybody like me."

"You included," he said smoothly. "Sure." " B u t w h y Dana R o c c o and not another teacher, why those particular kids? W h a t made t h e m so special?"

" U h , *duh,"* said Kevin. "I didn't like them."

"You don't like anybody," I pointed out. " W h a t , did they beat you at kickball? Or do you just not like Thursdays?"

In the context of Kevin's n e w specialty, my oblique reference to Brenda Spencer qualified as a classical allusion. Brenda killed two adults and w o u n d e d nine students in her San Carlos, California, high school only because, as the B o o m t o w n Rats' hit single subsequently attested, "I D o n ' t Like Mondays." T h e fact that this seminal atrocity dates back to 1979 distinguishes the sixteen-year-old as ahead of her time. My n o d to his puerile pantheon earned me what in other children would have been a smile.

"It must have been quite a project," I said, "trimming the list."

"Massive," he agreed affably. "Started out like, fifty, sixty serious contenders. Ambitious," he said, then shook his head.

"But impractical."

"All right, we have forty-five more minutes," I said. " W h y D e n n y Corbitt?"

" — T h e ham!" he said, as if checking his grocery list before checkout.

"You remember the name of a copy-machine repairman in Hawaii, but you're not too sure about the names of the people you murdered."

"Uyesugi actually did something. Corbitt, if I remember right, just sat all google-eyed against the wall as if waiting for his director to block the scene."

" M y point is, so D e n n y was a ham. So what?"

"See that dork do Stanley in *Streetcar?* I could do a better Southern accent *underwater."*

" W h a t part are you playing? T h e surliness, the swagger.

W h e r e ' d it come from? Brad Pitt? You know, you've picked up a bit of a Southern accent yourself. It isn't very good, either."

His fellow inmates are abundantly black, and his locution has begun to warp accordingly. He's always spoken with a peculiar slowness, that effortfiilness, as if he had to hoist the words from his

m o u t h with a shovel, so the slack-jawed urban-ghetto economy of dropped consonants and verbs is naturally infectious. Still, I was pleased with myself; I seemed to have annoyed him.

" I ' m not playing a part. I am the part," he said hotly. "Brad Pitt should play me."

(So he'd heard; a movie was already in development at Miramax.)

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "Brad Pitt's way too old to play some pipsqueak high school sophomore. Even if he were the right age, no audience would buy that a guy w h o looks that street-smart would do anything so moronic. I've read they're having trouble casting, you know. N o b o d y in Hollywood will touch your fdthy little part with a barge pole."

"Just as long as it isn't DiCaprio," Kevin grumbled. "He's a twit."

"Back to business." I sat back. " W h a t was your problem with Ziggy Randolph? You could hardly accuse him of failing your exalted artistic standards, like Denny. Word was that he had a professional future in ballet."

" W h a t had a *professional future"* said Kevin, "was his butthole."

" H e got an overwhelming reception w h e n he gave that speech, explaining he was gay and proud of it at assembly. You couldn't bear that, could you? T h e whole student body cooing h o w *courageous* he was."

"And h o w do you like that," Kevin marveled. "Standing ovation for taking it up the ass."

"But I really haven't been able to figure w h y Greer Ulanov," I said. " T h e fuzzy-headed girl, short, with prominent teeth."

"Buck teeth," he corrected. "Like a horse."

"You generally had it in for the lookers."

"Anything to get her to shut up about her 'vast right-wing conspiracy.'"

"Ah, she was the one," I clued. " T h e petition." (I don't k n o w if you remember, but an indignant petition to N e w York

congressmen circulated Gladstone High School w h e n Clinton was impeached.)

"Admit it, *Mumsey,* having a crush on the president is totally low-rent."

"I think," I hazarded, "you don't like people w h o have crushes of any sort."

" M o r e theories? 'Cause I think," he returned, "you need to get a life."

"I had one.You took it."

We faced off. " N o w you're my life," I added-"All that's left."

"That," he said, "is pathetic."

" B u t wasn't that the plan? Just you and me, getting to k n o w one another at last."

" M o r e *theories*! Aren't I fascinating."

"Soweto Washington." I had a long hst to get through, and I had to keep the program moving. "He's going £° walk again, I've read. Are you disappointed?"

" W h y should I care?"

" W h y did you ever care? E n o u g h to try to kill him?"

"Didn't try to kill him," Kevin maintained staunchly.

" O h , I see. You left him with holes in b o t h thighs and that's all on purpose. Heaven forbid that Mr. Perfect psychopath should miss."

Kevin raised his hands. "Hey, hey! I made mistakes! Letting that little movie nerd off scot-free was the last thing I had in mind."

"Joshua Lukronsky," I remembered, t h o u g h we were getting ahead of ourselves. "Did you hear that your friend Joshua's been brought on board the Miramax frim, as a script consultant? They want to be historically accurate. For a 'movie nerd,' it's a dream come true."

Kevin's eyes screwed up. He doesn't like it w h e n tangential characters collect on his cachet. He was equally resentful w h e n Leonard Pugh posted his web page, KK's^best_friend.com, w h i c h has garnered thousands of hits and p u r p o r t s to expose

o u r son's darkest secrets for the price of a double-click. *Best friend my ass!* Kevin snarled w h e n the site w e n t up. *Lenny was closer to a pet hamster.*

"If it makes you feel better," I added sourly,"Soweto's basketball career is no longer a *slam-dunk."*

"Yeah, well as a matter of fact that does make me feel better.

Last thing the world needs is one more darkie w h o wants to play hoops in the N B A . Talk about stale."

"Talk about stale! Another high school rampage?"

Kevin cleaned his nails. "I prefer to think of it as *tradition."*

" T h e media assumed you picked on Soweto because he was black."

" T h a t makes sense," Kevin snorted. " N i n e kids locked in that gym. O n l y one of them's of the *Negro* persuasion, and bingo, it's a 'hate crime.'"

" O h , it was a hate crime, all right," I said quiedy.

Kevin half smiled. "Totally."

" T h e y said the same thing about Miguel Espinoza. That you went for him because he was Latino."

"Superspic? I leave out *communities of color,* they'd say I discriminated."

" B u t the real reason was he was such an academic bright spark, isn't it? Skipped a grade. All those dizzyingly high scores on state achievement tests and the PSAT."

" W h e n e v e r he talk to you, turn out he just trying to use

'echelon' in a sentence."

" B u t you k n o w what 'echelon' means. You k n o w all kinds of big words. That's w h y you thought it was such a hoot to write whole essays with words three letters long."

"Fine. So it's not like I was *jealous.* W h i c h , if I ' m getting the drift of this *bor-ing* third degree, is what you're getting at."

I took a m o m e n t ; you know, Kevin *did* look bored.

D o c u m e n t a r y makers like Jack Marlin, criminologists dashing off best-sellers, the principals and teachers and reverends interviewed on the news; your parents, Thelma Corbitt, Loretta Greenleaf—

all these people obsessing over *why KK did it,* with the notable exception of our son. It was one more subject in which Kevin was simply not interested: himself.

" T h e cafeteria worker," I raised. " H e doesn't fit the pattern." (I always feel sheepish that I can't remember his name.) " H e wasn't on the list, was he?"

"Collateral damage," said Kevin sleepily.

"And," I said, determined to say something to get him to look alive, "I k n o w your secret about Laura Woolford. She was pretty, wasn't she?"

"Saved her trouble," Kevin slurred. "First sign of a wrinkle and she'd a killed herself anyway."

"Very, very pretty."

"Yep. Bet that girl's mirror was all wore out."

"And you were sweet on her"

If I'd any remaining doubt, Kevin's theatrical guffaw cleared it right up. He doesn't often, but he rent me then, just a litde.

Adolescents are so obvious. "Give me credit," he sneered, "for better taste. That Barbie doll was all accessories."

"It embarrassed you, didn't it?" I prodded. " T h e eyeliner, the Calvin Klein, the designer haircuts. T h e nylons and opalescent pumps. N o t icy, misanthropic *KK's* style."

"She wasn't all that hot-looking w h e n I was finished."

"It's the oldest story in the book," I goaded. *"After confiding darkly to friends that, 'If I can't have her, then no one else is going to...,' Charlie Schmoe opened fire...'* Is that what this whole sorry mess was meant to cover? Another pimply teen smitten with the unattainable prom queen goes berserk?"

"In your dreams," said Kevin. "You wanna turn this into a Harlequin romance, that's your midget imagination, not mine."

"Luke W o o d h a m was lovesick, wasn't he? In Pearl? You know,

' T h e W h i n e r . ' "

" H e only went out with Christy Menefee *three times,* and they'd been busted up for a year!"

"Laura rebuffed you, didn't she?"

"I never came within a mile of that cunt. And as for that fat W o o d h a m fuck, you k n o w his *mother* came with him on every date? No wonder he reamed her with a butcher knife."

" W h a t happened? D i d you finally w o r k yourself up into cornering her against a locker during lunch? Did she slap you?

Laugh in your face?"

" T h a t the story you wanna tell yourself," he said, scratching his exposed midriff, "I can't stop you."

"Tell other people, too. I was approached by a documentary filmmaker not long ago. Terribly anxious to hear 'my side.'

Maybe I should call him back. I could explain to h i m h o w it was unrequited love all along. My son was head-over-heels for this smashing litde n u m b e r w h o wouldn't give him the time of day. After all, h o w did Laura go down? Kevin may have made a hash of the rest of that crowd, but he shot her *straight through the heart*, our own cupid of Gladstone High. All those other p o o r wretches were just camouflage, j u s t — w h a t did he call it?

Collateral damage."

Kevin leaned forward and lowered his voice confidentially.

" H o w m u c h did you care what girls I did and didn't like before I whacked a couple? H o w m u c h did you care about anything that went on in my head until it got out?"

I ' m afraid that at that point I lost it a bit. *"You want me to feel sorry for you?"* I said in a voice that carried; the mole guard looked over. "Well, first I'll feel sorry for Thelma Corbitt, and Mary Woolford. For the Fergusons and the Randolphs, for the Ulanovs and the Espinozas. I'll let my heart

break over a teacher w h o bent over backward to get inside your precious head, over a basketball player w h o can barely walk, and even a cafeteria worker I've never met, and *then* we'll see if there's any pity left over for you.

There just might be, but it's the scraps of my table you're due, and for scraps you should count yourself lucky."

" N y e h *nyeh* nyeh nyeh *nyeh* nyeh-nyeh *nyeh-nyeh)."*

T h e n he laughed. O h , Franklin. W h e n e v e r I let fly he seems so satisfied.

I admit, I tried to make h i m mad today. I was determined to make h i m feel small, n o t the deep dark impenetrable c o n u n d r u m of O u r C o n t e m p o r a r y Society, but the butt of a joke, *hoisted on his own retard.* Because every time Kevin takes another b o w as Evil Incarnate, he swells a littie larger. Each slander slewed in his direction-— *nihilistic, morally destitute, depraved, degenerate,* or *debased*—bulks his scrawny frame better than my cheese sandwiches ever did. No w o n d e r he's broadening out. He eats the world's hearty denunciations for breakfast. Well, I don't want h i m to feel unfathomable, a big beefed-up allegory of generational disaffection; I don't want to allow h i m to cloak the sordid particulars of his tacky, crappy, gimcrack, derivative stunt with the grand mantle of Rudderless Youth Today. I want him to feel hke one m o r e miserable, all-too-understandable snippet of a plain d u m b kid. I want him to feel widess and sniveling and inconsequential, and the last thing in the world I want to betray is h o w m u c h of my day, every day, I spend trying to figure out what makes that boy tick.

My needling about his being stuck on Laura was merely an educated guess. Although any suggestion that his grandiose atrocity derived from a tawdry litde broken heart was certain to offend, I ' m not honestly sure h o w m u c

h Kevin s crush on Laura Woolford had anything to do with *Thursday.* For all I know, he was trying to impress her.

But I have made a study of those victims, whether or not he cares to examine the list himself. At first glance, it was a disparate group, so m o d e y that their names might have been drawn from a hat: a basketball player, a studious Hispanic, a f d m buff, a classical guitarist, an emotive thespian, a computer hacker, a gay ballet student, a homely political activist, a vain teen beauty, a part-time cafeteria worker, and a devoted English teacher. Slice of life; an arbitrary assemblage of eleven characters scooped willynilly from the fifty or so w h o m our son didn't happen to like.

But Kevin's displeasure is not the only thing that his victims had in c o m m o n . Okay, throw out the cafeteria worker, clearly there by mistake; Kevin has a neat mind, and he'd prefer a tidy group of ten. Otherwise, every one of t h e m *enjoyed* something.

Never m i n d w h e t h e r this passion was pursued with any flash; whatever his parents claim, I gather Soweto Washington hadn't a chance at going pro; D e n n y was (forgive me,Thelma) an atrocious actor, and Greer Ulanov's petitioning N e w York congressmen w h o were going to vote with Clinton anyway was a waste of time.

No one is willing to admit as m u c h now, but Joshua Lukronsky's obsession with movies was apparently annoying to many more students than just our son; he was forever quoting whole sequences of dialogue from Q u e n t i n Tarantino scripts and staging tiresome contests at lunch, w h e n the rest of the table preferred to negotiate trades of roast beef sandwiches for slices of p o u n d cake, over w h o could name ten R o b e r t D e N i r o films in chronological order.

Be that as it may, Joshua did love movies, and even his outright irksomeness didn't keep Kevin from coveting the infatuation itself. It didn't seem to matter infatuation with what. Soweto Washington loved sport and at least the illusion of a future with the Knicks; Miguel Espinoza, learning (at any rate, Harvard); Jeff Reeves, Telemann; D e n n y Corbitt, Tennessee Williams; Mouse Ferguson, the Pentium III processor; Ziggy Randolph,

West Side Story, not to mention other men; Laura Woolford loved herself; and Dana R o c c o — t h e ultimate unforgivable—loved Kevin.

I realize that Kevin doesn't experience his aversions as envy.

To Kevin, all ten of his victims were supremely ridiculous.

T h e y each got excited over trifles, and their enthusiasms were comical. But like my wallpaper of maps, impenetrable passions have never made Kevin laugh. From early childhood, they have enraged him.

Sure, most children have a taste for spoliation. Tearing things apart is easier than making them; however exacting his preparations for *Thursday,* they couldn't have been nearly as demanding as it would have been to befriend those people instead. So annihilation is a kind of laziness. But it still provides

the satisfactions of agency: I wreck, therefore I am. Besides, for most people, construction is tight, concentrated, bunchy, whereas vandalism offers release; you have to be quite an artist to give positive expression to abandon. And there's an ownership to destruction, an intimacy; an appropriation. In this way, Kevin has clutched D e n n y Corbitt and Laura Woolford to his breast, inhaled their hearts and hobbies whole. Destruction may be motivated by nothing more complicated than acquisitiveness, a kind of h a m -

handed, misguided greed.

I watched Kevin despoil other people's pleasures for most of his life. I can't count the n u m b e r of times I picked up the w o r d *favorite* during some hot-under-the-collar maternal diatribe—the red galoshes stuffed with snack cake in kindergarten were Jason's *favorite* footwear. Kevin could easily have overheard that the white caftan he squirted with concord grape juice

was my *favorite* floor-length dress. For that matter, each walking adolescent bull's-eye in that gym was some teacher's *favorite* student.

He seems to especially revile enjoyments I can only call innocent. For example, he habitually beelined for anyone w h o was poised to snap a photograph and walked deliberately in front of the lens. I began to dread our trips to national monuments, if only on behalf of the Japanese and all their wasted fdm. Why, across the globe are scattered dozens of collectible snaps, blurred head shots of the notorious *KK* in profile.

Further illustrations are countless; I'll cite only one in detad.

W h e n Kevin had just turned fourteen, I was approached at his middle school's PTA meeting to chaperone the eighth-grade spring dance. I r e m e m b e r being a little surprised that Kevin intended to go, since he boycotted most organized school activities. (In retrospect, maybe the draw was Laura Woolford, whose shimmering crotch-high frock for the occasion must have set M a r y back hundreds.) This end-of-the-year bash was the highlight of the school's social calendar, and most of his classmates would have b e e n anticipating admission to this

exclusively senior rite of passage since the sixth grade. T h e idea was to give these kids practice at being R e a l Teenagers and to let t h e m swagger around as kings of the hill before entering the adjoining high school as hacked-on p e o n freshmen at the b o t t o m of the pecking order.

Anyway, I said I'd do it, n o t especially looking forward to confiscating pints of Southern Comfort; I treasured the m e m o r y of my o w n hot, surreptitious hits from hip flasks behind the stage curtains ofWilliam Horlick High School in Racine. I was never keen on getting stuck with the role of Big Killjoy Meanie and wondered if I might not look quietly the other way so long as the kids were discreet and didn't get sloppy drunk.

Of course I was naive, and Southern C o m f o r t was the least of the administration's worries. At our preparatory meeting the week before, the first thing they taught chaperones was h o w to recognize a crack vial. Graver still, the faculty was still anguished over a couple of national incidents at the start of the calendar year. Kids graduating from eighth grade may be *only* fourteen, but Tronneal M a n g u m had been *only* thirteen w h e n that January in West Palm Beach, he shot and killed another classmate in front of his middle school because the boy owed h i m $40. O n l y three weeks later in Bethel, Alaska (it's embarrassing, Franklin, but I remember all this stuff because w h e n conversation flags at Claverack, Kevin often reverts to reciting his favorite bedtime stories), Evan Ramsey had got hold of his family's .12-gauge shotgun, murdered a popular school athlete at his desk, shot up the school, and then systematically stalked and blew away his high school principal—in my day, a w o r d whose spelling we were taught to distinguish from *principle* by the mnemonic, " T h e principal is your PAL."

Statistically, of course, in a country with 50 million schoolkids, the killings were insignificant, and I remember going h o m e after that meeting and complaining to you about the faculty's overreaction. They'd moaned about the fact that there wasn't enough left in the budget to purchase metal detectors, while

training a whole cadre of chaperones on h o w to frisk every kid on the way in. A n d I indulged myself in a bit of liberal indignation (that always revulsed you).

" O f course, for ages *black* kids and *Hispanic* kids have been shooting each other in shithole junior high schools in Detroit," I opined over a late dinner that night, " a n d that's all very by-the-by.

A few *white* kids, *middle-class* kids, protected, private-telephone-line, o w n - t h e i r - o w n - T V *suburban* kids go ballistic, and suddenly it's a national emergency. Besides, Franklin, you should have seen those parents

and teachers eat it up." My stuffed chicken breast was getting cold. "You've never seen so m u c h self-importance, and w h e n I made a j o k e once they all turned to me with this *it's not funny* expression, like airport security w h e n you make a crack about a bomb. T h e y all love the idea of being on the front line, doing something o o h - o o h dangerous instead of chaperoning a *sock hop*, for God's sake, being in the national spotlight so they can participate in the usual politics of hysteria. I swear on some level they're all jealous, because Moses Lake and Palm Beach and Bethel have had one, what's wrong with Gladstone, w h y can't we have one, too. Like they're all secretly hoping that as long as Junior or Baby Jane sneaks off without a scratch wouldn't it be keen if the eighth-grade dance turned into a melee and we could all get on TV before the whole tacky number becomes passe..."

I ' m making myself a little sick here, but I ' m afraid I did spout this sort of thing, and yes, Kevin was probably listening. But I doubt there was a household in the U n i t e d States that didn't talk about those shootings one way or another. Decry the "politics of hysteria" as I might, they hit a nerve.

I ' m sure that this dance has emerged in such high relief in my m i n d because of where it took place. After all, it's a small m e m o r y ; whether to the disappointment of those parents or not, the event passed without a hitch, and as for the one student w h o probably remembers the evening as a calamity, I never even k n e w her name.

T h e gym. It was in that gym.

— 2 9 5 —

Because the middle school and high school had been built on the same campus, they often shared facilities. Fine facilities they were, too, for it was partly this *good school* that had drawn you to buy us a house nearby. Since, to your despair, Kevin shunned school sports, we'd never attended his middle school's basketball games, so this glorified baby-sitting j o b remains my sole experience of that structure from the inside. Freestanding, it was cavernous, m o r e than two stories high, slick and expensive—

I think it even converted to an ice hockey rink. (H o w wasteful that the Nyack School Board has, last I read, decided to tear the whole thing down; students are apparently dodging PE courses by claiming that the gym is haunted.) That night, the arena made quite a b o o m i n g echo chamber for the DJ. Any sports equipment had been cleared off, and though my expectation of balloons and bunting was clearly a hangover from my o w n dance debut doing the twist in 1961, they had hung a mirror ball.

I may have been a rotten mother—just shut up, it's t r u e — b u t I wasn't so deplorable as to hang around my fourteen-year-old son at his school dance. So I positioned myself on the opposite side of the gym, enjoying a good view of his sideways slump against the cinder-block wall. I was curious; I'd rarely seen h i m in the context of his larger social milieu. T h e only student beside him was the unshakable Leonard Pugh, with his weaselly hee-hee face, and even at 100 yards exuding that greasy toadying quality, a sniggering obsequiousness that always seemed of a piece with his faint odor of day-old fish. Lenny had recendy pierced his nose, and the area around the stud had got infected—one nostril was bright red and half again as large as the other; its smear of antibiotic cream caught the light. Something about that kid always put me in m i n d of brown smudges in underpants.

Kevin had recently conceived his tiny-clothes fashion, which (typically) Lenny had aped. Kevin's black jeans might have fit h i m w h e n he was eleven. T h e legs reached mid-calf, exposing dark hairs sprouting on his shins; the crotch, whose zipper would not quite close, well sponsored his equipment. Lenny's ocherous

cotton slacks would have looked nearly as hideous had they fit.

T h e y were both wearing stretched Fruit of the L o o m white T-shirts, leaving the usual three inches of bare midriff.

Perhaps it was my imagination, but whenever schoolmates passed by, they seemed to give those two wide berth. I might have been alarmed that our

son appeared to be the object of avoidance—and I was, rather, though his classmates didn't snicker at Kevin as if he were a social reject. If anything, had the other students been laughing, they stopped. In fact, w h e n crossing in front of that pair, other students ceased to talk altogether and only resumed their chatter once well out of the duo's earshot.

T h e girls held themselves unnaturally erect, as if holding their breath. Instead of squinting at the tiny-clothes brigade askance, even football types trained their eyes straight ahead, only darting an edgy backward glance at Kevin and his *pet hamster* once a safe stone's throw away. Meanwhde, as eighth-graders h u n g back from the dance floor and flowered the walls of the gym, the space on either side of our son and his sidekick remained deserted for a good ten feet. N o t one of his classmates nodded, smded, or ventured so much as an innocuous how's tricks, as if hesitant to risk—-what?

I'd anticipated that the music would make me feel old—by groups I'd never heard of, whose p o u n d i n g appeal would elude the decrepit. But w h e n the sound system cranked up, I was startled to recognize, between selections of timeless bubblegum, some of the same "artists," as we pretentiously called t h e m then, to which you and I would have flopped about in our twenties: T h e Stones, Credence,The W h o ; Hendrix,Jophn, and T h e Band; Franklin, Pink Floyd! W i t h little to do with myself and repelled by the sweet red p u n c h (which cried out for a slug of vodka), I wondered if the fact that Kevin's peers were still nodding along with Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young, T h e Grateful Dead, and even T h e Beatles made our own era especially distinguished, or his especially destitute. W h e n "Stairway to Heaven" came on—that old warhorse!—I had to stifle a laugh.

I never expected that Kevin would dance; that would be *dumb,* and in some respects that boy hadn't changed since he was four. T h e rest of the group's reluctance to break in the dance floor was pro forma; we were the same way, no one wanting to be first, to draw excessive and inevitably less than

kind attention to themselves. In my day, we'd all dare one another interminably, nip at D u t c h courage behind the curtains, and finally shuffle from the walls in concert once our safety-in-numbers q u o r u m had reached at least ten. So I was impressed when, the mid-court populated by no more than whirling polka dots from the mirror ball, one lone soul took the floor. She didn't assume a shadowy corner, either, but the center.

W i t h pale, translucent skin, the girl n o t only had blond hair but blond lashes and eyebrows, whose tentative definition made her features look washed-out. There was also a weakness in her chin—small and ski-sloped—and it was mostly due to this one less than classical feature that she'd never be considered pretty (by h o w little we're u n d o n e) . T h e other problem was her clothes.

Most girls at the dance had played it safe with jeans, and the few dresses I'd spotted were either black leather or sleek, spangled, and smashing, like Laura Woolford's. But this fourteen-year-old—for shorthand, let's call her Alice—was wearing a dress that came almost to her knees and tied in the back with a bow. It was a tan plaid. It had puffed sleeves. She had a ribbon in her hair and patent leather on her feet. She'd clearly been clad by a m o t h e r afflicted with some woefully generic notion of what a young girl wore to "a party," never mind the year.

Even I recognized at once that Alice was *uncool*—a w o r d whose improbable currency f r o m o u r generation to the next testifies to the timelessness of the concept. W h a t is cool changes; that there is such a thing as cool is immutable. A n d in our heyday, anyway, the average nerd got a little credit for acting mortified and apologetic, staring at his shoes. But I ' m afraid this p o o r chinless waif didn't have e n o u g h social intelligence to rue her puffed-sleeve, tan-plaid, tie-bowed party dress. W h e n her m o t h e r brought it h o m e , she doubtless threw her arms around the w o m a n in moronic gratitude.

It was "Stairway to Heaven" that had enticed her to strut her stuff.Yet however we may all keep a w a r m place in our hearts for that old Led Zeppelin standard, it's terribly slow and I personally remembered the tune as undanceable. N o t that this stopped Alice.

She extended her arms and lunged in ever-widening circles with her eyes closed. She was clearly transported, oblivious to the fact that enthusiastic turns exposed her panties. As she got caught up in the thrall of bass guitar, her moves lost any semblance of rock-and-roll boogie and wobbled between unschooled ballet and Sufi dancing.

In case I've sounded mean, I was really rather enchanted. O u r little Isadora D u n c a n understudy was so uninhibited, so exuberant!

I may even have envied her a little.Wistfiilly I remembered jigging around our Tribeca loft to Talking Heads w h e n pregnant with Kevin, and it saddened me that I no longer did that. And though she was a good eight years older than Celia, something about this girl as she flounced and pirouetted from one end of the gym to the other reminded me of our daughter. An unlikely exhibitionist, she seemed to have taken to the floor simply because this was one of her *favorite* songs—that word again—and because the empty space made it easier to rush around the floor in a swoon. She probably emoted about her own living r o o m to the same song and saw no reason not to dance in exactly the same flamboyant manner merely because 200 malicious adolescents were leering on the sidelines.

It always seems interminable, but "Stairway to Heaven" *was* almost over; he might have held off two more minutes. But no. I felt a peculiar stab of fear as Kevin peeled languidly off the cinder block and sauntered in an unerring straight line toward Alice, tracking her like a Patriot missile homing in on a Scud. T h e n he stopped, right under the mirror ball, having correcdy calculated that Alice's next pirouette would land her left ear exacdy in line with his mouth.

There. Contact. He leaned, just a litde, and whispered.

I w o u l d never pretend to k n o w w h a t he said.But the image has i n f o r m e d all my subsequent mental reconstructions of *Thursday.*

Alice froze. H e r face infused with all the self-consciousness of w h i c h it had a m o m e n t before been so conspicuously absent.

H e r eyes darted left and right, unable to find a single resting place that afforded respite. Suddenly all too well aware of her audience, she seemed to register the obligations of the folly she'd begun; the song wasn't quite finished, and she was compelled to keep up appearances by bobbing to a few m o r e bars. For the next forty seconds or so, she floundered back and forth in a macabre slow-motion death dance, like Faye Dunaway at the end of *Bonnie and Clyde*.

T h e DJ having aptly segued to Jefferson Airplane's " W h i t e Rabbit," she clutched her tan-plaid skirt and bunched it between her legs. Hobbling toward a dark corner, Alice pressed her elbows tightly to her waist, as each hand fought for cover under the other. I sensed that, in some sickening fashion, over the course of the previous minute she had just grown up. N o w she k n e w that her dress was geeky, that her chin was weak.That her m o t h e r had betrayed her. That she was *uncool;* that she would never be pretty.

A n d most of all, she had learned to never, ever take to an empty dance floor—possibly any dance floor—for the rest of her life.

I wasn't there, on *Thursday.* But two years before, I was witness to its harbinger in that same gym, w h e n a lone graduate of Gladstone Middle School was assassinated.

M A R C H 2 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

My colleague Ricky approached me at the end of the workday today, and his proposal was the closest he's ever come to acknowledging the unmentionable: He invited me to attend his church. I was embarrassed, and thanked him, but said vaguely,"I don't think so"; he didn't let it go and asked why. W h a t was I supposed to say,

"Because it's a load of crap"? I always feel a little condescending toward religious people, as they feel condescending toward me. So I said, I wish I could, that I could believe, and sometimes I try very hard to believe, but nothing about my last few years suggests that an entity with any kindness is watching over me. Ricky's comeback about *mysterious ways* left neither of us very impressed. Mysterious, I said. N o w you can say that again.

I've often returned to the remark you made in Riverside Park before we became parents, "At least a kid is an answer to the Big Question." It perturbed me at the time that your life was posing this Big Question with such persistence. O u r childless period must have had its shortfalls, but I recall charging in the same conversation that maybe we were "too happy," a distinctly more agreeable excess than a surfeit of harrowing emptiness. Maybe I ' m shallow, but you were enough for me. I loved scanning for your face outside Customs after those long trips that were so m u c h harder on you than on me, and sleeping late the next m o r n i n g in a hot, pectoral cocoon. It was enough. But our twosome was not,

it seems, enough for you. While that may make you, between us, the more spiritually advanced, it hurt my feelings.

Yet if there's no reason to hve without a child, how could there be with one? To answer one life with a successive life is simply to transfer the onus of purpose to the next generation; the displacement amounts to a cowardly and potentially infinite delay. Your children's answer, presumably, will be to procreate as well, and in doing so to distract themselves, to foist their own aimlessness onto their offspring.

I raise this matter because I think that you did expect Kevin to answer your Big Question, and that he could sense that fantastic expectation from an early age. How? Small things. T h e aggressive heartiness in your voice, under which gasped a shy desperation. The ferocity of your embraces, which he may have found smothering. T h e resolve with which you cleared your decks every weekend to put yourself at his disposal, for I suspect that

children want their parents to be busy; they don't want to have to fill your schedule with their paltry needs. Children want to be assured that there are other things to do, important things; more important, on occasion, than they are.

I'm not commending neglect. But he was only a little boy, and he alone was supposed to answer a Big Question that had his grown father stymied. What a burden to place on the newly arrived! What's worse, children, Hke adults, vary drastically in what I can only caU their religious appetites. Ceha was more Hke me: a hug, a crayon, and a cookie, and she was sated. Though Kevin seemed to want practicaUy nothing, I now realize that he was spiritually ravenous.

Both of us were lapsed, so it made sense to raise our kids as neither Armenian Orthodox nor Presbyterian. Although I ' m reluctant to inveigh that Youth Today just need to crack the Old Testament, it sobers me that, thanks to us, Kevin may never have seen the inside of a church. T h e fact that you and I were brought up with something to walk away from may have advantaged us, for we knew what lay behind us, and what we were not. So I

w o n d e r if Kevin, too, would have been better off had we spewed a lot of incense-waving hooey that he could have coughed back in o u r faces—those extravagant fancies about virgin births and commandments on mountaintops that really stick in a kid's throat. I ' m being impractical; I doubt we could have faked a faith for the chddren's sake, and they'd have k n o w n we were posing.

Nevertheless, repudiation of self-evident dross like travel guides and Oldsmobile ads must be so unsatisfying.

It was Kevin's starvation that his teachers—with the exception of D a n a R o c c o — n e v e r detected, p r e f e r r i n g to diagnose o u r little underachiever as one more fashionable victim of attention deficit disorder.

T h e y were determined to find something mechanically w r o n g with him, because broken machines can be fixed. It was easier to minister to passive incapacity than to tackle the more frightening matter of fierce, crackling disinterest.

Clearly Kevin's powers of attention were substantial—witness his painstaking preparations for *Thursday* or his presently impeccable c o m m a n d of the malevolents' R o l l of H o n o r , right d o w n to the population of Uyesugi's pet fish. He left assignments unfinished not because he couldn't finish them, but because he could.

This voracity of his may go some distance toward explaining his cruelty, w h i c h among other things must be an inept attempt at taking part. Having never seen the p o i n t — o f anything—he must feel so brutally left out. T h e Spice Girls are *dumb,* Sony Playstations are *dumb, The Titanic* is *dumb,* mall cruising is *dumb,* and h o w could we disagree? Likewise, taking photos of the Cloisters is *dumb,* and dancing to "Stairway to Heaven" in the latter 1990s is *dumb.* As Kevin approached the age of sixteen, these convictions grew violent.

He didn't want to have to answer your Big Question, Franklin.

He wanted an answer from you.The glorified loitering that passes for a fruitful existence appeared so inane to Kevin from his very crib that his claim last Saturday that he was doing Laura Woolford

"a favor" on *Thursday* may have been genuine.

But me, I ' m superficial. Even once the shine was off travel, I

could probably have sampled those same old foreign foods and that same old foreign weather for the rest of my life, just so long as I flew into your arms at Kennedy w h e n I came home. I didn't want m u c h else. It is Kevin w h o has posed my Big Question. Before he came along, I'd been m

u c h too busy attending to a flourishing business and a marvelous marriage to bother about what it all amounted to.

Only once I was stuck with a bored child in an ugly house for days on end did I ask myself what was the point.

And since *Thursday*? He took away my easy answer, my cheating, slipshod shorthand for what life is for.

We last left Kevin at the age of fourteen, and I ' m getting anxious.

I may have dwelt so on his early years to stave off rehashing the more recent incidents that set you and me so agonizingly against one another. Doubdess we both dread wading back through events whose only redeeming feature is that they are over. But they are n o t over. N o t for me.

D u r i n g the first semester of Kevin's ninth-grade year in 1997, there were two m o r e School Shootings: in Pearl, Mississippi, and Paducah, Kentucky, b o t h small towns I had never heard of, b o t h n o w permanently marked in the American vocabulary as synonyms for adolescent rampage. T h e fact that Luke W o o d h a m in Pearl n o t only shot ten kids, three fatally, but killed his mother—stabbing her seven times and crushing her j a w w i t h an aluminum baseball b a t — m a y have given me an extra private pause. (Indeed, I remarked w h e n the reports first started p o u r i n g in, " L o o k , all they do is go on and on about h o w he shot those kids. And then, oh, by the way, he also murdered his m o m . *By the way?* It's obvious that the w h o l e thing had to do with his mother."This, in due course, was an observation that w o u l d qualify in legal terms as *admission against interest.)* Still, I ' m n o t so pretentious as to i m p u t e to myself during that period a sense of deep personal foreboding, as if I perceived these repeated tragedies on the news as an inexorable c o u n t d o w n to o u r o w n family's misfortune. N o t at all. Like all

news, I regarded it as having n o t h i n g to do with me. Yet like it or not, I had m o r p h e d from maverick globetrotter to one m o r e white, well-off suburban mother, and I couldn't help but be u n -

nerved by deadly flights of lunacy f r o m fledglings of my o w n kind. Gangland killings in Detroit or L.A. happened on another planet; Pearl and Paducah happened on mine.

I did feel a concentrated dislike for those boys, w h o couldn't submit to the odd faithless girlfriend, needling classmate, or dose of working-single-parent distraction—who couldn't serve their miserable time in their miserable public schools the way the rest of us did—without carving their dime-a-dozen problems ineluctably into the lives of other families. It was the same petty vanity that drove these boys' marginally saner contemporaries to scrape their dreary little names into national monuments. A n d the self-pity! That nearsighted W o o d h a m creature apparently passed a note to one of his friends before staging a tantrum with his father's deer rifle: " T h r o u g h o u t my life I was ridiculed. Always beaten, always hated. C a n you, society, blame me for what I do?"

A n d I thought, *Yes, you little shit! In a heartbeat!*

Michael Carneal in Paducah was a similar type—overweight, teased, wallowing in his tiny suffering like trying to take a bath in a puddle. But he'd never been a discipline problem in the past; the worst he'd ever been caught at theretofore was watching the Playboy video channel. Carneal distinguished himself by opening fire on, of all things, a prayer group. He managed to kill three students and w o u n d five, but judging f r o m the cheek-turning memorial services and merciful banners in classroom w i n d o w s —one of w h i c h embraced photos not only of his victims but of Carneal himself with a heart—the born-again got theirs back by forgiving him to death.

T h e October night that news of Pearl came in, I exploded as you and I watched the *Jim Lehrer Newshour.* "Jesus, some kid calls h i m *a fag* or pushes him in the hallway, and suddenly it's *ooh, ooh, I'm gonna shoot up the school, I'm gonna crack from all this terrible pressure!* Since w h e n did they make American kids so soft?"

"Yeah, you gotta ask yourself," you agreed, "whatever happened to heading out to the playground to duke it out?"

"Might get their hands dirty." I appealed to our son as he glided through on the way to the kitchen; he'd been eavesdropping, which as a rule he preferred to participating in family conversations."Kevin, don't boys at your school ever setde their differences with an old-fashioned fistfight?"

Kevin stopped to regard me; he always had to weigh up whether anything I asked him was worthy of reply. " C h o i c e of weapons," he said at last, "is half the fight."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Woodham's weak, flabby, unpopular. Fistfight's low p e r -

centage. A doughboy's got way better odds w i t h a 30 millimeter.

Smart call."

" N o t that smart," I said hotly. "He's sixteen. That's the cutoff in most states for being tried as an adult. They'll throw away the key." (Indeed, Luke W o o d h a m would be given three life sentences, and 140 extra years for good measure.)

"So?" said Kevin with a distant smile. "Guy's life is already over. Had more fun while it lasted than most of us ever will.

G o o d for him."

" C o o l it, Eva," you intervened as I sputtered. "Your son's pulling your leg."

For most of his life, Kevin's troubles, too, remained on a minor scale. He was bright but hated school; he had few friends, and the one we k n e w was

smarmy; there were all those ambiguous incidents, from Violetta to let-us-call-her-Alice, that set off alarm bells at a volume only I seemed able to hear.Yet character expresses itself with remarkable uniformity, be it on a batdefield or in the supermarket. To me, everything about Kevin was of a piece. Lest my theories about his existential disposition seem too highfalutin, let's reduce the unifying glue to one word: *spite.*

Consequendy, w h e n two Orangetown policemen showed up at our door on that night in D e c e m b e r 1997 with Kevin and

the unsavory Leonard Pugh in tow, you were shocked, while I regarded this constabulary visit as overdue.

" W h a t can I do for you, officers?" I overheard.

" M r . Khadourian?"

"Plaskett," you corrected, not for the first time. " B u t I am Kevin's father."

Having been helping Celia with her homework, I crept up to hover behind you in the foyer, buzzing from voyeuristic excitement.

"We had a motorist phone in a complaint, and I ' m afraid we found your son and his friend here, on that pedestrian overpass over 9W? We had to run these two down, but it seemed pretty obvious that they were the kids throwing detritus onto the roadway."

" O n t o the cars?" you asked, "or just empty lanes?"

"Wouldn't be m u c h sport in *empty lanes,"* snarled the second officer.

"It was mosdy water babies, Dad!" said Kevin behind the police. I k n o w his voice was changing, but whenever he spoke to you, Franklin, it skipped up an octave.

"Wasn't water balloons this motorist called in about," said the second, chunkier cop, w h o sounded the m o r e worked up.

"It was *rocks.* A n d we checked the highway on either side of the overpass —littered with chunks of brick."

I nudged in urgently. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Thankfully, there were no direct hits," said the first officer.

" W h i c h makes these boys real, real lucky."

"I don't k n o w about lucky," Lenny sniveled, " w h e n you get nabbed by the cops."

"Gotta have luck to push it, kid," said the pohceman with the hotter head. " R o n , I still say we should—"

"Look, Mr. Plastic," the first cop overrode. "We've r u n your son through the computer, and his record's clean. Far as I can tell, he comes f r o m a good family." *(Good,* of course, meaning rich.)

"So we're going to let this young m a n off with a warning. B u t we take this sort of thing real serious—"

"Hell," the second cop interrupted, "a few years back, some creep tossed a quarter in front of a w o m a n doing seventy-five?

Shattered the windscreen and drove right into her head!"

R o n shot his partner a glance that would get t h e m the more quickly to D u n k i n ' Donuts. " H o p e you give this young m a n a good talking to."

" A n d how," I said.

"I expect he'd no idea what kind of risk he was taking," you said.

"Yeah," said C o p N o . 2 sourly. "That's the whole attraction of throwing bricks from an overpass. It seems so harmless."

"I appreciate your leniency, sir," Kevin recited to the primary.

"I've sure learned my lesson, sir. It won't happen again, sir."

Policemen must get this *sir* stuff a lot; they didn't look bowled over. " T h e *leniency* won't happen again, friend," said the second cop, "that is for damned sure."

Kevin turned to the hothead, meeting the man's eyes with a glitter in his own; they seemed to share an understanding.Though picked up by the police for (as far as I knew) the first time in his life, he was unruffled. "And I appreciate the lift home. I've always wanted to ride in a police car— *sir!'*

"Pleasure's all mine," the cop replied jauntily, as if smacking gum. " B u t my m o n e y says that's not your last spin in a black-and-white— *-friend."*

After a bit more fawning gratitude from both of us, they were on their way, and as they left the porch, I heard Lenny whining,

"We almost outran you guys you know, 'cause you guys are like, totally out of shape...!"

You had seemed so sedate and courteous through this exchange that w h e n you wheeled from the door I was surprised to observe that your face was livid and lit with rage.You grabbed our son by the upper arm and shouted, "You could have caused a pileup, a fucking catastrophe!"

Flushed with a morbid satisfaction, I stepped back to leave you to it. *Cursing,* no less! Granted, had one of those bricks indeed

smashed someone's windshield I'd readily have forgone this petty jubilation for the full-blown anguish at which I would later get so m u c h practice.

But spared calamity, I was free to muse with the singsong of the playground, *You're gonna get in trou-ble.* Because I'd been so exasperated! T h e unending string of misadventures that trailed in Kevin's wake never seemed, as far as you were concerned, to have anything to do with him. Finally, a tatdetale besides m e — t h e police, w h o m Mr. Reagan Republican had no choice but to trust—-had caught o u r persecuted innocent red-handed, and I was going to enjoy this. Moreover, I was glad for you too to experience the bizarre helplessness of being this supposedly omnipotent parent and being completely flummoxed by h o w to impose a punishment that has the slightest deterrent effect. I wanted you to apprehend for yourself the lameness of sending a fourteen-year-old for a "time-out," the hackneyed predictability of "grounding" w h e n , besides, there was never anywhere that he wanted to go, and the horror of realizing that, if he did launch out to his archery range in defiance of your prohibition on practicing the sole activity that he seemed to enjoy, you would have to decide whether to physically tackle him to the lawn. Welcome to my life, Franklin, I thought. *Have fun.*

Ceha wasn't used to seeing you manhandle her brother, and she'd started to wail. I hustled her from the foyer back to her h o m e w o r k at the dining table, soothing that the policemen were our friends and just wanted to make sure we were safe, while you rustled our stoic son d o w n the hall to his room.

In such an excitable state, I had difficulty concentrating as I coaxed Celia back to her primer about farm animals. T h e yelling subsided surprisingly soon; you sure didn't b u r n out that fast w h e n you were mad at me. Presumably you'd switched to the somber disappointment that for many children is more devastating than a lost temper, though I'd tried stern gravity ad nauseam with o u r firstborn, and this was one more impotence I was glad for you to sample. Why, it was all I could do to stop myself from creeping d o w n the hall and listening at the crack of the door.

W h e n you emerged at last, you closed Kevin's door behind you with ministerial solemnity, and your expression as you entered the dining area was curiously at peace. I reasoned that getting all that shame and disgust out of your system must have been cleansing, and w h e n you motioned me over to the kitchen, I assumed that you were going to explain what kind of punishment you'd levied so that we could exact it as a team. I hoped that you'd come up with some novel, readily enforceable penalty that would get to our son in a place—I'd never found it—where it hurt. I doubted he was n o w remorseful about the brick-throwing itself, but maybe you had convinced him that outright juvenile delinquency was a tactical error.

"Listen," you whispered. " T h e whole caper was Lenny's idea, and Kevin went along because Lenny was only proposing water babies at first. He thought the balloons would just make a splash—and you k n o w h o w kids think that kind of thing is funny.

I told him even a little balloon exploding might have startled a driver and been dangerous, and he says he realizes that now."

"What," I said. " W h a t — a b o u t — t h e bricks."

"Well—they ran out of water babies. So Kevin says that before he k n e w it, Lenny had pitched a stone—maybe it was a piece of b r i c k — w h e n a car was coming. Kevin says he immediately told Lenny not to do that, since somebody could get hurt."

"Yeah," I said thickly. "That sure sounds hke Kevin."

"I guess Lenny managed to get a few m o r e bits of brick over the side before Kevin leaned on him hard enough that he cut it out. That must have been w h e n somebody with a mobile called the cops. Apparently they were still up there, you know, just hanging out, w h e n the police pulled up on the shoulder. It was spectacularly d u m b — h e admits that, t o o — b u t for a kid who's never had trouble with the law before those blinking blue lights must be pretty scary, and without thinking—"

"Kevin's a very bright boy, you always say." Everything that came out of my m o u t h was heavy and slurred. "I sense he's done plenty of *thinking"*

" M o m m y — ? "

"Sweetheart," I said, "go back and do your homework, okay?

Daddy's telling M o m m y a really good story, and M o m m y can hardly wait to hear h o w it ends."

"Anyway," you resumed, "they ran. Didn't get very far, since he realized that running was crazy, and he grabbed Lenny's jacket to p u t the brakes on. And here's the thing: It seems our friend Lenny P u g h already has something on his record—the old sugar-in-the-gas-tank trick, or some such. Lenny had been told that if he was caught at anything else they'd press charges. Kev reckoned that with his o w n clean record, they'd probably let h i m off with a warning. So Kevin told the cops that *he* was the ringleader, and he was the only one w h o threw rocks. I have to say, once the whole thing was on the table, I felt kind of sheepish for laying into h i m like that."

I looked up at you with dumbstruck admiration. " D i d you apologize?"

"Sure."You shrugged. "Any parent's got to admit w h e n he's made a mistake."

I groped my way to a chair at the kitchen table; I had to sit down.You poured yourself a glass of apple juice, while I declined one (what was w r o n g with you that you couldn't tell I needed a *stiff drink?).* You pulled up a chair yourself, leaning forward chummily as if this whole *misunderstanding* was going to make us an even m o r e closely knit, supportive, remember-that-daft-business-about-the-overpass family.

"I'll tell you," you said, and took a gulp of juice, "we just had this terrific conversation, all about the complexities of loyalty, you know? W h e n to stick by your friends, w h e r e to draw the line w h e n they're doing something you think is out of bounds, h o w m u c h you should personally sacrifice for a buddy. Because I warned him, he could have miscalculated

by taking the fall. He could have been booked. I admired the gesture, but I told him, I said I wasn't exacdy sure that Lenny P u g h was w o r t h it."

"Boy," I said. " N o holds barred."

— 311 —

Your head whipped around. "Was that sarcastic?"

Okay, if you weren't going to attend to a medical emergency, I would p o u r a glass of wine myself. I resumed my seat and finished o f f h a l f of it in two slugs. "That was a very detailed story. So you won't m i n d my clarifying a few things."

"Shoot."

"Lenny," I began. "Lenny is a w o r m . Lenny's actually kind of stupid. It took me a while to figure out what the appeal is—for Kevin, I m e a n . T h e n I got it:That's the appeal.That he's a stupid, pliant, self-abasing worm."

" H o l d on, I don't like him much either, but *self-abasing—?"*

" D i d I tell you that I caught them out back, and Lenny had his pants down?"

"Eva,you should k n o w about pubescent boys. It may make you uncomfortable, but sometimes they're going to e x p e r i m e n t — "

"Kevin didn't have his pants down. Kevin was fully clothed."

"Well, what's that supposed to mean?"

" T h a t Lenny isn't his *friend,* Franklin! Lenny is his slave! Lenny does anything Kevin tells him to, the m o r e degrading the better!

So the prospect of that miserable, sniggering, brownnosing dirtbird having an idea to do anything—much less being the 'ringleader'

of some nasty, dangerous prank, dragging p o o r virtuous Kevin unwillingly along—well, it's perfecdy preposterous!"

"Would you keep it down? And I don't think you need another glass of wine."

"You're right. W h a t I really need is a fifth of gin, but Merlot will have to do."

"Look. He may have made a dubious call, and he and I discussed that. But taking the rap still took guts, and I ' m pretty damned p r o u d — "

"Bricks," I interrupted. "They're heavy. They're big. Builders don't store bricks on pedestrian overpasses. H o w did they get there?"

"Piece of brick. I said piece."

"Yes," my shoulders slumped, " I ' m sure that's w h a t Kevin said,

, 55

too.

"He's our *son*, Eva. That should mean having a little faith."

"But the police said—" I left the thought dangling, having lost my enthusiasm for this project. I felt like a dogged attorney w h o knows that the sympathy of the j u r y is already lost but w h o still has to do the job.

"Most parents," you said, "apply themselves to *understanding* their kids, and not to picking apart every little—"

"I am trying to understand him. " M y ferocity must have carried; on the other side of the partition, Ceha started to whimper. "I wish you would!"

"That's right, go tend to Celia," you muttered as I got up to leave. " G o dry Celia's eyes and pat Celia's pretty gold hair and do Celia's h o m e w o r k for her, since G o d forbid she should learn to do one miserable assignment by herself. O u r son was just picked up by the cops for something he didn't do, and he's pretty shaken up, but never mind, because Celia needs her milk and cookies."

"That's right," I returned. "Because one of our children is spelling farm animals, while another of our children is pitching bricks at oncoming headlights. It's about time you learned to tell the difference."

I was really angry about that night, and I wasted most of my subsequent workday at AWAP mumbling to myself about h o w I could have married a *complete fool.* I ' m sorry. And this was despicable of me, but I never told you w h a t I stumbled across late that afternoon. Maybe I was just embarrassed, or too proud.

So beside myself with fury and frustration that I was getting nothing done, I took the CEO's prerogative of cutting out early.

W h e n I got back and relieved Celia's baby-sitter R o b e r t , I heard voices d o w n the hall. It seems that the *stupid, pliant, self-abasing worm* didn't even have the g o o d sense to make himself scarce for a few days after showing up at our d o o r with the police, because I recognized the nasal, querulous pule emitting from Kevin's nightmarishly tidy bedroom. Unusually, the door was ajar; but then I wasn't expected h o m e for another two hours. W h e n I headed toward the bathroom I wasn't exacdy eavesdropping, b u t — o h , I guess I was eavesdropping. T h e urge to listen at that door had been upon me the night before and had lingered.

"Hey, you see that cop's fat butt hanging out his pants?" Lenny was reminiscing. "Working man's smile grinning ear-to-ear! I bet if that guy'd taken a d u m p while he was running, it would've cleared his belt!"

Kevin did not seem to be joining in with Lenny's cackle.

"Yeah, well," he said. "Lucky for you I got *Mr. Plastic* off my back.

But you should have heard the scene in here, Pugh. Straight out of *Dawson's Creek.* Fucking nauseating. T h o u g h t I'd burst into tears before a commercial break from our sponsors."

"Hey, I hear you! Like, with those cops dude, you were so smooth dude, I thought that fat fuck was going to take you to some little r o o m and kick the shit out of you, 'cause you were driving him like, fucking insane! *Sir, I really must terribly protest, sir, that it was me— "*

"It was I, you grammatical retard. And just remember, chump, you owe m e one."

"Sure, bro. I owe you big-time. You took the heat like some superhero, like —like you was Jesus!"

" I ' m serious, pal. This one's gonna cost you," said Kevin.

"'Cause your low-rent stunt could do my reputation some serious damage. I got standards. Everybody knows I got standards. I saved your ass this time, but don't expect a sequel, like, 'Ass-Save II.' I don't like associating myself with this shit. *Rocks over an overpass.*

It's fucking trite, man. It's got no class at all, it's fucking *trite!'*

M A R C H 3 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

You've put it together: I felt ashamed of my false accusations, and that's the real reason I decided to ask Kevin on that mother-son outing, just the two of us. You thought it was a weird idea, and, w h e n you c o m m e n d e d so heartily that Kevin and I should do that sort of thing more often, I k n e w you didn't like it—especially once you added that barb about h o w we'd better avoid any pedestrian overpasses, "Since, you know, Kev would have an uncontrollable urge to throw whole Barcaloungers onto the road."

I was nervous about approaching h i m but pushed myself, thinking, there's no point in moaning about h o w your adolescent never talks to you if you never talk to him. A n d I reasoned that the trip to Vietnam the summer before last had backfired for being overkill, three solid weeks of close familial quarters w h e n at thirteen no kid can bear to be seen with his parents, even by communists. Surely one day at a time would be easier to take.

Besides, I had forced my o w n enthusiasm for travel d o w n his throat, instead of making an effort to do w h a t he wanted to d o —whatever that was.

My dithering beforehand over h o w to p o p the question made me feel like a bashful schoolgirl gearing up to invite our son to a rock c o n c e r t . W h e n I finally cornered h i m — o r myself, really—in the kitchen, I went with the sensation, saying, "By the way, I'd like to ask you out on a date."

Kevin looked mistrustful. " W h a t for."

"Just to do something together. For fun."

"Like, do what."

This was the part that made me nervous. Thinking of something " f u n " to do with our son was like trying to think of a really great trip to take with your pet rock. He hated sports and was indifferent to most movies; food was chaff, and nature an annoyance, merely the agent of heat or cold or flies. So I shrugged. "Maybe do a little Christmas shopping. Take you to d i n n e r ? " T h e n I pulled out my ace in the hole, playing perfectly to Kevin's absurdist strong suit. "And play a round or two *of miniature golJ\'*

He cracked that sour half smile, and I'd secured a companion for Saturday. I worried about what to wear.

In a switch-off reminiscent of *The Prince and the Pauper,* I would assume the role of Kevin's caring, engaged parent, while you would b e c o m e Celia s protector for the day."Gosh," you quipped lightly,"going have to come up with something to do that doesn't terrify her. Guess that rules out vacuuming."

To say that I wanted, truly desired, to spend all afternoon and evening with my prickly fourteen-year-old son w o u l d be a stretch, but I did powerfully desire to desire it—if that makes any sense. K n o w i n g h o w time went slack around that boy, I had scheduled our day: miniature golf, shopping on Main Street in Nyack, and then I would treat him to a nice dinner out. T h e fact he didn't care about Christmas presents or fine dining seemed no reason to skip the lesson that this is simply what people do. As for our sporting escapade, no one is meant to care about miniature golf, w h i c h must be why it felt so apt.

Kevin reported for duty in the foyer with an expression of glum forbearance, like a convict being hauled off to serve his sentence (though in that very circumstance not two years later, his face would instead appear cool and cocky). His ridiculous child-sized Izod knit was the loud orange of prison jumpsuits—not, as

I would have m u c h opportunity to estabhsh, a very becoming color on h i m — a n d with the tight shirt pulling his shoulders back, he might have been handcuffed. His low-slung khaki slacks from seventh grade were at fashion's cutting edge: Extending to mid-calf, they presaged the renaissance of pedal pushers.

We climbed into my new metallic double-yellow VW Luna.

"You know, in my day," I chattered, "these VW bugs were everywhere. Rattletrap and usually beaten up, full of destitute longhairs smoking dope and blasting T h r e e D o g Night on tinny eight-tracks. I think they cost something like $2,500. N o w this reissue is ten times that; it still fits two

adults and a cat, but it's a luxury automobde. I don't k n o w what that is—ironic, funny."

Sdence.At last, laboriously:"It means you'll spend twenty-five grand to kid yourself you're still nineteen, and still not get any trunk space."

"Well, I guess I do tire of all this retro-boomer stuff," I said.

" T h e f d m remakes of *The Brady Bunch* and *The Flintstones.* But the first time I saw it, I fell in love with this design. T h e Luna doesn't copy the original, it *alludes* to the original. And the old Beetle was poky. T h e Luna is still a little b u m p on the road, but it's a surprisingly beautiful car."

"Yeah," said Kevin. "You've said all that before."

I colored. It was true. I had.

I pulled into that funky little course in Sparkhill called " 9 W

G o l f " and finally noticed that Kevin hadn't w o r n a jacket. It was chilly, too, and overcast. " W h y didn't you wear a *coat?"* I exploded.

"You just can't get uncomfortable enough, can you?"

"Uncomfortable?" he said. " W i t h my o w n mother?"

I slammed the door, but with that G e r m a n engineering it only made a muffled *clump.*

Heaven knows what I'd b e e n thinking. Miniature golf being fundamentally ludicrous, maybe I'd h o p e d that it w o u l d lend o u r afternoon a leavening element of whimsy. Or maybe I'd h o p e d instead for some emotional inversion, whereby because everything that meant something to me m e a n t n o t h i n g to Kevin,

something that meant n o t h i n g to me might mean something to Kevin. In any case, it was wrongheaded. We paid the attendant and marched to the first hole—a bathtub sprouting dead weeds, guarded by a plaster giraffe that looked like a p o n y w i t h a w r u n g neck. In fact, all the course's models were gimcrack and careless, lending the place an ambiance of, as Kevin w o u l d say, who-gives-a-rat's-ass.The traffic on 9W was loud and relentless, and meanwhile, stiff goose bumps rose on Kevin's arms. He was freezing and I was making h i m do this anyway, because I had this w o n k y n o t i o n of having a m o t h e r - s o n " o u t i n g " and we would, goddamn it, have *fun.*

Naturally, anybody could roll a golf ball between the claw feet of that bathtub, since the feet were a yard apart. B u t once the course grew harder—under the missile, over to the lighthouse, d o w n the suspension bridge, around the milk churns, through the doors of the model Sparkhill-Palisades Fire D e p a r t m e n t —

Kevin set aside the studied ineptitude of curling a Frisbee on its side in the backyard, displaying instead the striking hand-eye coordination that his archery instructor had remarked u p o n more than once. But somehow the very fact that he was so good at this made it all the more poindess, and I couldn't help but be reminded of our first "game" w h e n he was two, rolling the ball back and forth on the floor exacdy three times. For my part, the rank silliness of this exercise had b e c o m e so glaring that I grew apathetic and muffed the holes. We said nothing, and the course took very litde time to complete, if only by the clock; I glanced constantly at my watch.This is what it's like to be Kevin, I thought. T h e leaden passage of minute by minute: This is what it's hke to be Kevin all the time.

At the end Kevin posed with his club hke a dapper gendeman, still silent but with a *nou>-what?* look, as if to say, okay, I did what you wanted and I hope you're satisfied.

"Well," I said grimly. "You won."

I insisted on driving h o m e to get his jacket, though reappearing back at the house so soon embarrassed me—you looked bemused—

and going up through Nyack to Gladstone and back to Nyack to shop introduced yet more awkwardness. Nevertheless, n o w that Kevin had made a hash of my one playful, offbeat idea for our afternoon—having turned it into a mechanical, bone-chilling farce—he seemed more contented. O n c e we parked (way d o w n Broadway, because the mid-December traffic was b u m p e r - t o -

b u m p e r and we were lucky to find the space we got), to my astonishment he volunteered a thought.

"I don't get w h y you celebrate *Christmas* w h e n you aren't a *Christian!'* He pronounced the *Christ* with a long *I* to emphasize the Jesus bit.

"Well," I said,"it's true that your father and I don't believe that some young man w h o was good at sound bites 2,000 years ago was the son of God. But it's nice to have holidays, isn't it? To make part of the year a litde different, something to look forward to. I learned studying anthropology at Green Bay is that it's important to observe cultural rituals."

"Just so long as they're totally empty," said Kevin breezily.

"You think we're hypocrites."

"Your word, not mine." He glided past the Runcible Spoon around the corner to Main Street, turning the heads of some older high school girls loitering across the way by the Long Island D r u m Center. Frankly I don't think his smoky Armenian looks drew their attention so much as the languid elegance of his manner, at such odds with his preposterous clothes: He moved levelly on the same plane, as if rolling on casters. T h e n , those fine exposed hipbones couldn't have hurt.

"So," Kevin summed up, weaving through pedestrians, "you want to keep the presents and the high-test eggnog, but chuck the prayers and the boring

Christmas Eve service. To cash in on the good stuff without having to pay for it with the shit."

"You could say that," I agreed cautiously. "In a broad sense I've tried to do that all my life."

"Okay, long as you can get away with it," he said cryptically.

" N o t sure it's always possible." And he let the subject go.

— 319 —

Conversation once again ceased to flow, so w h e n one of t h e m almost ran me over, I supposed aloud that maybe we could buy Celia one of those superthin aluminum R a z o r scooters that had abrupdy b e c o m e so popular.

Kevin said, "You know, couple years ago, you give a kid some geeky *scooter* for Christmas and he'd have bawled his eyes out."

I lunged at the chance to be collegial. "You're right, that's one of the things that's w r o n g with this country, it's so faddish.

It was the same w i t h in-line skates, right? Overnight, a must-have. Still —" I bit my lip, watching yet another boy whiz past on o n e of those narrow silver frames. "I wouldn't want Celia to feel left out."

"Mumsey. Get real. Ceil would be scared shitless. You'd have to hold her litde hand everywhere she w e n t or you'd have to *carry* her, scooter and all.You ready? 'Cause count me out."

Okay. We didn't get the scooter.

In fact, we didn't buy anything. Kevin made me so self-conscious that everything I considered seemed to damn me. I looked at the scarves and hats through his eyes and they suddenly seemed stupid or unnecessary. We had scarves. We had hats. W h y bother.

T h o u g h I was sorry to lose our parking space, I was glad of the chance to act the proper mother for once and announced sternly that we would n o w go back to the house, where he would dress for dinner in *normal-sized clothes*—although his airy response, "Whatever you say," made me more aware of the limits to my authority than of its force. As we passed back in front of the Runcible Spoon on the way to the car, a corpulent w o m a n was sitting alone at a table by the window, and her hot fudge sundae was built on that lavish American scale that Europeans b o t h envy and disparage.

"Whenever I see fat people, they're eating," I ruminated safely out of the diner's earshot. " D o n ' t give me this it's glands or genes or a slow metabolism rubbish. It's food. They're fat because they eat the w r o n g food, too m u c h of it, and all the time."

T h e usual lack of pickup, not even *mm-hmrn*, or *true*. Finally, a block later: "You know, you can be kind of harsh."

I was taken aback and stopped walking. "You're one to talk."

"Yeah. I am.Wonder where I got it."

Driving home, then, every time I came up with something to say—about pushy SUV drivers (or, as I preferred to playfully misspeak, *SRO* drivers), garish Nyack Christmas lights—I realized it was whitding, and I'd swallow the remark. I was apparently one of those types who, should she follow that edict about *if you can't say something nice*, would say nothing at all. O u r raw silence in my Luna supplied a foretaste of the long periods of dead air that would pass in Claverack.

Back home, you and Celia had been working on h o m e m a d e tree ornaments all afternoon, and you'd helped her to weave tinsel in her hair. You were in the kitchen arranging frozen fish sticks on a tray w h e n I

busded from the b e d r o o m and asked you to fasten the top button of my hot-pink silk dress. "Wow," you said, "you're not looking very maternal."

"I'd like to create a sense of occasion," I said. "I thought you liked this dress."

"I do. Still," you mumbled, buttoning, " T h a t slit up the thigh is cut pretty high.You don't want to make him uneasy."

" I ' m making someone uneasy, obviously."

I left to find some earrings and to splash on a little O p i u m , then returned to the kitchen to discover that Kevin had not, for once, merely followed the letter of my law, for I'd half expected to find h i m decked out in a "normal-sized" bunny suit. He was standing at the sink with his back to me, but even so I could see that his lush black rayon slacks rested gendy on his narrow hips and fell to his cordovans with a slight break. I hadn't bought him that white shirt; with its full sleeves and graceful drape, it may have been fencing garb.

I was touched, I really was, and I was about to exclaim about what a handsome figure he cut w h e n he didn't wear clothes designed for an eight-year-old w h e n he turned around. In his

hands was the carcass of a w h o l e cold chicken. Or it had been whole, before he clawed off b o t h breasts and a leg, the drumstick of which he was still devouring.

I probably turned white. " I ' m about to take you to dinner.Why are you eating the better part of a roast chicken before we go?"

Kevin wiped a little grease off the corner of his m o u t h with the heel of his hand, ill-concealing a smirk. "I was hungry." A rare enough admission that it could only be a ruse. "You k n o w —growing boy?"

"Put that away *right now* and get your coat."

So naturally once we were seated in Hudson House our *growing boy* had grown enough for the day, and he allowed that his appetite had waned. I would break bread with my son only in the most literal sense, for he refused to order an entree or even an appetizer, preferring to tear at the basket of hard rolls. T h o u g h he ripped the sourdough into ever smaller pieces, I don't think he ate any.

Defiandy, I ordered the mesclun salad, pigeon-breast appetizer, salmon, and a whole bottle of sauvignon blanc that I sensed I would finish.

"So," I began, battling discomfiture as I picked at greens under Kevin's ascetic eye; we were in a restaurant, why should I feel apologetic about eating? "How's school going?"

"It's going," he said. "Can't ask for m o r e than that."

"I can ask for a few more details."

"You want my course schedule?"

"No." I badly did not want to get annoyed. "Like, what's your favorite subject this semester?" I remembered too late that for Kevin the *word favorite* attached exclusively to the enthusiasms of others that he liked to despoil.

"You imply I like any."

"Well," I thrashed, having difficulty stabbing a forkful of arugula small enough that it wouldn't smear honey-mustard dressing on my chin. "Have you thought about joining any after-school clubs?"

— 3 2 2

He looked at me with the same incredulity that would later meet my inquiries about the cafeteria menus at Claverack. Maybe the fact that he

wouldn't deign to answer this question at all made me lucky.

" W h a t about your, ah, teachers? Are any of them, you know, especially __"

"And what *bands* are you listening to these days?" he said earnesdy. " N e x t you can wheedle about whether there isn't some cute little cunt in the front row that's got me itchy. That way you can segue into h o w it's all up to me of course, but before balling the chick in the hallway I might decide to *wait* until I ' m *ready.*

R i g h t around dessert you can ask about *dmuugs.* Careful, like,

'cause you don't want to scare me into lying my head off, so you have to say h o w you *experimented* but that doesn't mean I should *experiment* too. Finally, once you've sucked up that whole bottle you can go gooey-eyed and say h o w great it is to spend *quality time* together and you can shift out of your chair and put an arm around my shoulder and give it a litde *squeeze."*

"All right, Mr. Snide." I abandoned my lettuce. " W h a t do *you* want to talk about?"

"This was your idea. I never said I wanted to talk about a fucking thing."

We squared off over my pigeon breast and red-currant confit, and I began to saw. Kevin had a way of turning pleasures into hard work. As for the turn he took after three or four minutes'

sdence, I can only conclude that he t o o k pity on me. Later in Claverack he would never be the one to blink first, but after all, in H u d s o n House he was only fourteen.

"Okay, I've got a *topic"* he proposed slyly,picking up a carmine crayon from the restaurant's complimentary glass of Crayolas, grown ubiquitous as scooters. "You're always griping about this country and wishing you were in Malaysia or something. What's your problem with the place. Really. American *materialism?"*

M u c h like Kevin w h e n I proposed this date, I suspected a trap, but I had an entree and two-thirds of a bottle to go, and I

didn't want to spend it drawing tic-tac-toes on the disposable tablecloth. " N o , I don't think that's it," I answered sincerely. "After all, as your grandfather would say—"

"Materials are everything. So what's your b e e f ? "

This is sure to d u m b f o u n d you, b u t in that m o m e n t I couldn't think of one thing w r o n g w i t h the U n i t e d States.

I ' m often stymied in this vein w h e n some stranger on a plane, making conversation w h e n I put d o w n my book, asks w h a t other novels I've enjoyed: I draw such a perfect blank that my seatmate might infer that the paperback stuffed in the magazine pocket is the first fiction I've read in my life. My leery outlook on the U n i t e d States was precious to m e — e v e n if, thanks to you, I had learned to give the country grudging credit for at least being a spirited, improvisational sort of place that, despite its veneer of conformity, cultivated an impressive profusion of outright lunatics. Abruptly incapable of citing a single feature of this country that drove me around the b e n d , I felt the b o t t o m fall o u t for a second and w o r r i e d that maybe I hadn't kept the U S . at arm's length from sophisticated cosmopohtanism, but rather f r o m petty prejudice.

Nevertheless, on airplanes it eventually comes to me that I adore Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky.* T h e n I remember V.

S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River,* which always reminds me of Paul Theroux's delightful *Girls at Play,* and I ' m away, restored to literacy again.

"It's ugly," I submitted.

"What? T h e amber waves of grain?"

" T h e fast-food taka-taka. All that plastic. A n d it's spread all around the country Hke potato blight."

"You said you Hke the Chrysler Building."

"It's old. Most modern American architecture is horrendous."

"So this country's a dump.Why's anywhere else any better."

"You've hardly been anywhere else."

"Vietnam was a shithole. That lake in H a n o i stank."

"But didn't you think the people were gorgeous? Even just physically gorgeous."

"You took me to Asia for chink pussy? I could of booked one of those package holidays on the Web."

"Having fun?" I asked dryly.

"I've had better." He shot a ball of bread into the basket.

"'Sides.The guys all looked like girls to me."

"But I thought it was refreshing," I insisted, "along that lake—even if it does smell—the way the Vietnamese pay entrepreneurs with bathroom scales a few dong to weigh themselves, in the hopes that they've *gained* a few pounds. It's biologically sane."

"Put those gooks around a bottomless vat of French fries for long enough and they'll pork out wider than they are tall, just like mall rats in N e w Jersey. You think only Americans are greedy? I don't pay attention in European History too good, but I don't think so."

Served the salmon for which I n o w had litde appetite, I d r u m m e d my fingers.With the backdrop of the wallwide seascape at Hudson House, in

that flashy white shirt with its billowing sleeves, raised collar, and a V-neck cut to the sternum, Kevin could have passed for Errol Flynn in *Captain Blood.*

" T h e accent," I said. "I hate it."

"It's your accent, too," he said. "Even if you do say *tomahto."*

"You think that's pretentious."

" D o n ' t you?"

I laughed, a litde. "Okay. It's pretentious."

Something was loosening up, and I thought, my, maybe this "outing" wasn't a bad idea after all. Maybe we're getting somewhere. I began to throw myself into the conversation in earnest. "Look, one of the things about this country I really can't stand? It's the lack of accountability. Everything w r o n g with an American's life is somebody else's fault. All these smokers raking in millions of dollars in damages from tobacco companies, w h e n , what, they've k n o w n the risks for *forty years.* Can't quit? Stick it

to Philip Morris. N e x t thing you know, fat people will be suing fast-food companies because they've eaten too many Big Macs!"

I paused, catching myself. "I realize you've heard this before."

Kevin was winding me up, of course, like a toy. He had the same intent, mischievous expression I'd seen recendy on a boy making his model race car hurtle off the rocks inTallman Park by remote control. " O n c e or twice," he allowed, repressing a smile.

"Power walkers," I said.

" W h a t about them."

" T h e y drive me insane." Of course, he'd heard this, too. B u t he hadn't heard this, because until then I hadn't quite put it together: "People around here can't just *go for a walk,* they have to be getting with some kind of program. A n d you know, this may be at the heart of it, *what's my beef* All those intangibles of life, the really good but really elusive stuff that makes life w o r t h living—

Americans seem to believe they can all be obtained by joining a group, or signing up to a subscription, or going on a special diet, or undergoing aroma therapy. It's not just that Americans think they can buy everything; they think that if you follow the instructions on the label, the product has to work. T h e n w h e n the product doesn't work and they're still unhappy even though the right to happiness is enshrined in the Constitution, they sue the bejesus out of each other."

" W h a t do you mean, *intangibles,"* said Kevin.

"Whatever, as your friends would say. Love—joy—insight."

(To Kevin, I could as well have been talking about little green m e n on the moon.) "But you can't order t h e m on the Internet or learn t h e m in a course at the N e w School or look t h e m up in a How-To. It's not that easy, or maybe it is easy.. .so easy that trying, following the directions, gets in the way.. .1 don't know."

Kevin was doodling furiously on the tablecloth with his crayon. "Anything else?"

" O f course there's anything else," I said, feeling the m o m e n t u m that gets rolling in those plane chats w h e n I finally get access to the library in my head, remembering *Madame Bovary,* and *Jude the Obscure,* and *A Passage to India.* "Americans are fat, inarticulate, and ignorant.They're demanding, imperious, and spoded. They're self-righteous and superior about their precious democracy, and condescending toward other nationalities because they think they've got it right—never m i n d that half the adult population doesn't vote. A n d they're boastful, too. Believe it or not, in Europe it isn't considered acceptable to foist on n e w acquaintances

right off the bat that you went to Harvard and you o w n a big house and what it cost and which celebrities come to dinner.

A n d Americans never pick up, either, that in some places it's considered crass to share your taste for anal sex with someone at a cocktail party you've k n o w n for five minutes—since the whole concept of privacy here has fallen by the wayside. That's because Americans are trusting to a fault, innocent in a way that makes you stupid. Worst of all, they have no idea that the rest of the world can't stand them."

I was talking too loudly for such a small establishment and such abrasive sentiments, but I was strangely exhdarated.This was the first time that I'd been able to really talk to my son, and I h o p e d that we'd crossed the R u b i c o n . At last I was able to confide things that I well and truly beheved, and not just lecture—please don't pick the Corleys' prize-winning roses.

Granted, I'd begun in a childishly inept way, asking *how's school*, while he was the one who'd conducted our talk like a competent adult, drawing out his companion. But as a consequence I was proud of him. I was just fashioning a remark along these lines, w h e n Kevin, w h o had been scribbling intently on the tablecloth with that crayon, finished whatever he was drawing, looked up, and nodded at the scrawl.

"Wow," he said. "That's a whole lot of adjectives."

Attention deficit disorder in a pig's eye. Kevin was an able student w h e n he bothered, and he hadn't been doodling; he'd been taking notes.

"Let's see," he said, and proceeded to check off successive elements of his list with his red crayon. *"Spoiled.* You're rich.

I ' m n o t too sure w h a t you think you're doing without, b u t I bet you could afford it. *Imperious.* Pretty good description of that speech just now; if I was you, I wouldn't order dessert,

'cause you can bet the waiter's gonna h a w k a loogie in your raspberry sauce. *Inarticulate*? L e m m e s e e . . . " He searched the tablecloth, and read aloud, *"It's not that easy, or maybe it is easy, I don't know.* I don't call that Shakespeare myself. Also, seems to me I ' m sitting across from the lady w h o goes on these long rants about 'reality T V ' w h e n she's never watched a single show.

A n d t h a t — o n e of your favorite words, Mumsey—is *ignorant.*

N e x t : *boasting.* W h a t was all that these-dumb-fucks-suck-dead-m o o s e - d i c k - a n d - I ' m - s o - m u c h - c o o l e r - t h a n - t h e m if it wasn't showing off ? Like somebody w h o *thinks she's got it right* and n o b o d y else does. *Trusting.. .with no idea other people can't stand them."* He underscored this one and t h e n looked me in the eye with naked dislike. "Well. Far as I can tell, about the only thing that keeps you and the other dumb-ass *Americans* f r o m being peas in a p o d is you're not *fat.* And just because you're skinny you act *self-righteous—condescending*—and *superior.* Maybe I'd rather have a big cow of a m o t h e r w h o at least didn't think she was better than everybody else in the fucking country."

I paid the bill. We wouldn't conduct another mother-son outing until Claverack.

Discouraged from getting her the scooter, I went to considerable trouble to locate a "small-eared elephant shrew" as a Christmas present for Celia. W h e n we'd visited the Small Mammals exhibit in the Bronx Zoo, she'd been enchanted by this incongruous httle fellow, w h o looked as if an elephant crossed with a kangaroo had interbred with several generations of mice. T h e importation was probably illegal—if not outright endangered, this tiny creature from southern Africa was identified at the zoo as "threatened, due to habitat loss"—which didn't help my case w h e n you grew impatient with the time it took to find one. At length we struck a deal. You'd look the other way as I located a pet shop that

specialized in "unusual" animals on the Internet, I the other way as you bought Kevin that crossbow

I never told you what Celia's present cost, and I don't think I'll tell you now, either. Suffice it to say that once in a while it was nice to be wealthy. The short-eared elephant shrew—inaptly named; neither elephant nor shrew, it has flanged, cupped ears that are proportionately enormous—was, bar none, the most successful present I've ever given. Ceha would have been bowled over by a roll of Lifesavers, but even our agreeable daughter expressed degrees of exhilaration, and w h e n she unwrapped the big glass cage her eyes bulged. Then she flew into my arms with a torrent of thanks. She kept getting up from Christmas dinner to check that the cage was warm enough or to feed him a raw cranberry. I was already worried. Animals don't always flourish in alien climates, and giving such a perishable present to a sensitive child was probably rash.

Then, I may have purchased"Snuffles," as Celia christened him, as much for myself as for her, if only because his delicate, wide-eyed vulnerability reminded me so of Ceha herself. With long, downy fur reminiscent of our daughter's fine hair, this five-ounce fluff ball looked as if, with one good puff, he would scatter to the winds like a dandelion. Balanced on haunches that narrowed to slender stilts, Snuffles looked precarious when upright. His signature snout, trumpet-shaped and prehensile, routed about the dirt-lined cage, both touching and comic. T h e animal didn't run so much as hop, and his bounding within the confines of his hemmed-in world exuded the cheerful make-the-best-of-it optimism with which Celia would soon face her own limitations.

Although elephant shrews are not stricdy vegetarian—they eat worms and insects—massive brown eyes gave Snuffles an awed, frightened appearance, anything but predatory. Constitutionally, Snuffles, like Celia, was quarry.

Appreciating that her pet mustn't be overhandled, she would poke a nervous finger through the cage door to stroke the tips of his tawny fur. W h e n she had friends over to play, she kept her

bedroom door shut while she decoyed playmates to more durable toys. Maybe that means she's learning, I prayed, about other people. (Celia was popular partly for being indiscriminate, since she brought home the playmates that other children despised—hke that spoiled, strident creature Tia, whose mother had the gall to advise me quietly that it was "really better ifTia is allowed to win board games." Celia deduced as much without being told, as she asked me pensively after her bossy companion had left,

"Is it okay to cheat to lose?") Contemplating our daughter as she defended Snuffles, I searched for a firmness, a resolve in her expression that might indicate an incipient capacity to defend herself.

Yet unwillingly, I considered the possibility that, while lovely to my own eye, Celia was fetching in a way that outsiders might be apt to overlook. She was only six, but I already feared that she would never be beautiful—that she was unlikely to carry herself with that much authority. She had your mouth, too wide for her small head; her lips were thin and bloodless. Her tremulous countenance encouraged a carefulness around her that was wearing. That hair, so silken and wispy, was destined to grow lank, its gold to give way to a dingier blond by her teens. Besides, isn't true beauty a tad enigmatic? And Celia was too ardess to imply concealment. She had an available face, and there is something implicitly uninteresting about the look of a person w h o will tell you whatever you want to know. Why, already I could see it: She would grow into the kind of adolescent w h o conceives a doomed crush on the president of the student council, w h o doesn't know she's alive. Celia would always give herself away cheaply. Later, she would move in— too young—with an older man w h o would abuse her generous nature, w h o would leave her for a more buxom woman who knows how to dress. But at least she would always come home to us for Christmas, and had she opportunity, she would make a far finer mother than I ever was.

Kevin shunned Snuffles, its very name an indignity to a teenage boy. He was more than willing to catch spiders or crickets and

dangle the live morsels into the cage—standard boy-stuff and the perfect j o b for him, since Celia was too squeamish. But the cool, deadpan teasing was merciless.You couldn't have forgotten the night I served quad, and he convinced her that the scrawny carcass on her plate was y o u - k n o w - w h o .

I know, Snuffles was just a pet, an expensive pet, and some kind of unhappy ending was inevitable. I should have thought of that before I gave her the little beast, though surely to avoid attachments for fear of loss is to avoid life. I had hoped he'd last longer, but that wouldn't have made it any easier for Celia w h e n calamity hit.

T h a t night in February 1998 is the only instance I can remember of Ceha s dissembling. She kept darting around the house, crawling on the floor, picking up the couch skirting and peering under the sofa, but w h e n I asked her what she was looking for she chirped, "Nothing!" She continued scuffling around on all fours past her bedtime, refusing to explain the game she was playing, but begging to play it longer. Finally, enough was enough, and I hauled her off to bed as she struggled. It wasn't like her to be such a brat.

"How's Snuffles?" I asked, trying to distract her w h e n I turned on the light.

H e r body stiffened, and she didn't look at the cage w h e n I bounced her onto the mattress. After a pause, she whispered,

"He's fine."

"I can't see h i m from here," I said. "Is he hiding?"

"He's hiding," she said, in an even smaller voice.

" W h y don't you go find him for me?"

"He's *hiding"* she said again, still not looking at the cage.

T h e elephant shrew did sometimes sleep in a corner or under a branch, but w h e n I searched the cage myself, I couldn't spot any tufts. "You didn't let *Kevin* play with Snuffles, did you?" I asked sharply, in the same tone of voice I might have asked, *You didn't put Snuffles in a blender, did you?*

"It's all my fault!" she gasped, and began to sob."I th-thought I closed the cage door, but I guess I d-d-d-didn't! 'Cause w h e n I came in after supper it was open and he was gone! I've looked everywhere!" *Shsh, now there, we'll find him*, I cooed, but she would n o t be quieted. " I ' m stupid! Kevin says so and he's right.

I ' m stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid!" She hit herself so hard on the temple with her balled up fist that I had to grab her wrist.

I was hopeful that her crying jag would b u r n itself out, but a little girl's grief has astonishing staying power, and the strength of her self-loathing tempted me to make false promises. I assured her that SnufHes could not have got very far and that he would *definitely* be right back in his cozy cage by morning. Grasping at my perfidious straw, Celia shuddered and lay still.

I don't think we gave up until about 3 A.M.—and thanks, again, for your help. You had another scouting j o b the next day, and we would both miss sleep. I can't think of a cranny we didn't check; you moved the dryer, I combed the trash. M u m b l i n g g o o d -

naturedly, " W h e r e is that bad boy?" you pulled all the books out of the lower shelves while I steeled myself to check for hair in the disposal.

"I don't want to make this worse with an I-told-you-so," you said w h e n we b o t h collapsed in the living r o o m with dust balls in our hair. "And I did think it was cute. B u t that's a rare, delicate animal, and she's in first grade."

"But she's been so conscientious. Never out of water, careful about overfeeding.Then to just, leave the door open?"

"She is absent-minded, Eva."

"True. I suppose I could order another o n e . . . "

"Fugeddaboutit. O n e lesson in mortality is enough for the year."

"You think maybe he got outside?"

"In which case he's already frozen to death," you said cheerfully.

"Thanks."

"Better than *dogs..."*

That was the story I put together for Celia the next day: that

Snuffles had gone to play outdoors, w h e r e he was m u c h happier with lots of nice fresh air, and where he'd make lots of animal friends. Hey, why not turn it to my advantage? Ceha would believe anything.

All things being equal, I'd expect to recollect our daughter's ashen m o p e of the following week, but n o t ordinary housekeeping chores. But under the circumstances, I have good reason to recall that the kids' bathroom sink backed up that weekend. Janis wouldn't be in until Monday, and I'd never spurned a little upkeep of my o w n h o m e n o w and again. So I smote the clog with a few glugs of Liquid-Plumr, poured in one cup of cold water, and left it to sit, according to the directions.Then I put the Liquid-Plumr away. D i d you seriously imagine that after all this time I would change my story? *I put it away.*

M A R C H 8 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

My G o d , there's been another one. I should have k n o w n on M o n d a y afternoon w h e n all my coworkers suddenly started to avoid me.

Standard issue. In a suburb outside San Diego, fifteen-year-old Charles "Andy"Williams—a scrawny, unassuming-looking white kid with thin hps and matted hair like well-trod carpet—brought a .22 to Santana High School in his backpack. He hid out in the boys' bathroom, where he shot two, proceeding to the hallway to fire at anything that moved. Two students were killed, thirteen injured. O n c e he had retreated to the bathroom again, the police found him cowering on the floor with the gun to his head. He whimpered incongruously, "It's only m e " ; they arrested the boy without a struggle. It almost goes without saying by n o w that he'd just broken up with his girlfriend—who was twelve.

Curiously, on the news Monday night, some of his fellow students characterized the shooter, as usual, as "picked on,"

persecuted as a "freak, a dork, and a loser." Yet a whole other set of kids attested that Andy had plenty of friends, wouldn't remotely qualify as unpopular or especially ragged on, and was to the contrary "well-liked." These latter descriptions must have confused our audience, since w h e n J i m Lehrer revisited the story tonight for another inquiry into *why, why, why,* all depictions along the lines of "well-liked" had been expunged. If Andy Williams

hadn't been "bullied," he failed to support the now fashionable revenge-of-the-nerds interpretation of these incidents, which were now meant to teach us not stricter gun control but concern for the agonies of the underage outcast.

Accordingly, while "Andy"Williams is n o w nearly as famous as his crooner counterpart, I doubt there's a news consumer in the country w h o could tell you the name of either of the two students he shot dead—teenagers w h o never did anything wrong outside of heading to the

bathroom on a morning that their more fortunate classmates resolved to hold their bladders through Geometry:Brian Zuckor and R a n d y Gordon.Exercising what I can only regard as a civic duty, I have committed their names to heart.

I've heard parents throughout my life allude to horrifying incidents in which something happened to their children: a full-immersion baptism by a boiling pot of turkey stew or the retrieval of a wayward cat via an open third-story window. Prior to 1998, I had casually assumed that I knew what they were talking about—or what they avoided talking about, since there's often a private fence around such stories, full access to which, like intensive care units, only immediate family is allowed. I'd always respected those fences. Other people's personal disasters of any sort are exclusionary, and I'd be grateful for that Don't Enter sign, behind which I might shelter a secret offensive relief that my own loved ones were safe. Still I imagined that I knew roughly what lay on the other side. Be it a daughter or a grandfather, anguish is anguish. Well, I apologize for my presumption. I had no idea.

W h e n you're the parent, no matter what the accident, no matter how far away you were at the time and how seemingly powerless to avert it, a child's misfortune feels like your fault.

You're all your kids have, and their own conviction that you will protect them is contagious. So in case you expect, Franklin, that I'm simply setting about one more time to deny culpability, to

the contrary. Broadly, it still feels like my fault, and broadly, it felt hke my fault at the time.

At the very least, I wish I'd stuck to my guns on our chdd-care arrangements. We'd hired R o b e r t , that seismology student from Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, to pick up Celia from school and stick around the house untd one of us got home, and that's the way the rules should have

stayed. Against all odds, we managed to keep R o b e r t , t o o — though he threatened to quit—once we assured him that Kevin was n o w old enough to look after himself and he need only look after Celia. But you were on this responsibility kick. Kevin was fourteen, as old as many sitters in our neighborhood. If Kevin was to b e c o m e trustworthy, he had first to be trusted; sure, it sounded good. So you told our chdd-minder that as long as Kevin had returned from ninth grade and had been apprised that he was n o w to keep an eye on Celia, R o b e r t could go.That solved the problem that kept cropping up, that you would get stuck in traffic and I would work a bit late, and (however well-compensated for his time) R o b e r t would get stranded, chafing, on Palisades Parade w h e n he had research at Lamont to which he needed to return.

W h e n I try to remember that Monday, my m i n d shies, hke ducking a hurtling tether ball. T h e n the m e m o r y curves centrifugally back around again, so that w h e n I stand back up it hits me in the head.

I was once more working a little late. T h e new arrangement with R o b e r t made me feel less guilty for putting in an extra hour, and AWAP's preeminence in the budget-travel niche had started to slide. We had so m u c h more competition than w h e n I started o u t — *T h e Lonely Planet* and *The Rough Guide* had sprung up; meanwhile, with the whole country aslosh in cash from a buoyant stock market, demand for the really dirt-cheap travel in which we specialized had dropped. So against my better judgment, I was working up a proposal for a whole new series, *A Wing and a Prayer for Boomers*—whose target audience would be dush with Internet start-up stock, probably overweight, nostalgic about their first seat-of-the-pants trip to Europe with a beat-up copy of *W&P*

in the sixties, convinced they were still college students if not in fact then in spirit, accustomed to $30 cabernets but, by conceit, still adventurous, that is, eager for comfort so long as that's not what it was called and by all means in horror of resorting to the stodgy *Blue Guide* hke their parents—when the phone rang.

You said to drive carefully.You said that she was already in the hospital and there was nothing I could do now.You said that her life was not endangered. You said that m o r e than once. All this was true.Then you said that she was

going to be "all right," which was not true, though for most messengers of dismal tidings the urge to issue this groundless reassurance seems to be irresistible.

I had no choice but to drive carefully, because the traffic on the George Washington Bridge was barely moving. W h e n at last I laid eyes on your collapsed expression in the waiting room, I realized that you loved her after all, which I castigated myself for ever having doubted. Kevin wasn't with you, to my relief, because I might have clawed his eyes out.

Your embrace had rarely offered so little solace. I kept hugging you harder to get something out of it, like squeezing an empty bottle of hand lotion until it wheezes.

She was already in surgery, you explained.While I'd driven in, you'd run Kevin home, because there was nothing to do but wait, and there was no point making this harder on her brother than it was already. But I wondered if you hadn't whisked him from the waiting r o o m to safeguard him from me.

We sat in those same sea-green metal chairs where I had agonized over what Kevin would tell the doctors w h e n I broke his arm. Maybe, I supposed miserably, for the last eight years he'd been *biding his time*. I said, "I don't understand what happened." I was quiet; I didn't shout.

You said, "I thought I told you. Over the phone."

"But it doesn't make sense." Anything but contentious, my tone was simply baffled. " W h y would she—what would she be doing with that stuff ?"

"Kids."You shrugged. "Playing. I guess."

"But," I said."She'll, ah—." My m i n d kept blanking out. I had to reconstruct what I'd wanted to say all over again, repeating the conversation

to myself, where we were, what came next...

Bathroom. Yes.

"She'll go to the bathroom by herself now," I resumed. "But she doesn't like it in there. She never has. She wouldn't *play* in there." An incipient insistence in my voice must have sounded dangerous; we would shrink back from the ledge. Ceha was still in surgery. We wouldn't fight, and you would hold my hand.

It seemed hours later that the doctor emerged. You'd called h o m e on your cell phone, twice, out of my earshot as if sparing me something; you'd bought me coffee from the machine along the wall, and it was n o w topped with crinkled skin.When a nurse pointed us out to the surgeon, I suddenly understood w h y some people worship their doctors, and w h y doctors are prone to feel godlike. But with one look at his face, I could see that he wasn't feeling very godlike.

" I ' m sorry," he said. "We really tried. But there was too m u c h damage. I ' m afraid we couldn't save the eye."

We were encouraged to go home. Ceha was heavily sedated, and she would remain so for some time. N o t long enough, I thought.

So we stumbled from the waiting room. At least, you pointed out numbly, he says the other eye is probably okay. Just that m o r n i n g I'd taken for granted the fact that our daughter had two.

O u t in the parking lot, it was cold; in my flight from the office, I'd left my coat. We had two cars to drive home, which made me feel colder. I sensed we were at a junction of sorts and feared that if we each launched off in separate vehicular universes we would end up in the same place only in the most banal, geographical sense.You must have felt the same need to confirm that we were, as my staff had lately taken to saying five times a day, *on the same page,* because you invited me into your truck for a few minutes to debrief and get warm.

I missed your old baby-blue pickup, w h i c h I associated with our courtship, powering along the turnpike with the windows d o w n and sound system pounding, like a living Bruce Springsteen lyric. A n d the pickup was more you, old-you anyway: classic, d o w n - h o m e , honest. Pure, even. Edward H o p p e r would never have painted the bulky 4x4 with which you replaced it. Reared up unnaturally above wide, oversized tires, the body had the blunted, bulging contours of an inflatable dinghy. Its bullying fenders and puffed-up posture reminded me of those p o o r little lizards whose only weapon is display, and the truck's overdrawn, cartoon manliness had prompted me to quip in better days, "If you check under the chassis, Franklin, I bet you'll find a tiny dick." At least you'd laughed.

T h e heating worked well; too well, since once we'd idled for a few minutes the cab got stuffy. It was bigger than the Ford, but your baby-blue had never felt this claustrophobic with just the two of us.

Finally, you knocked your head back on the padded headrest and stared at the ceiling. "I can't believe you left it out."

Stunned, I didn't respond.

"I thought about not saying that," you proceeded. "But if I swallowed it, I'd be not saying it, and not saying it, for weeks, and that seemed worse."

I licked my lips. I had begun to tremble. "I didn't leave it out."

You dropped your head, then sighed. "Eva. D o n ' t make me do this. You used that Liquid-Plumr on Saturday. I remember because you went on about h o w the kids' drain smelled weird or something, and then later that afternoon you warned us n o t to run any water in that sink for the next h o u r because you'd put drain cleaner in it."

"I put it away," I said. "Back in that *high* cabinet with the child-lock on it, which Celia couldn't even reach with a chair!"

" T h e n *how did it get out?"*

" G o o d question," I said icily.

— 3 4 0 —

"Look, I realize that you're usually very careful with caustic substances and lock that shit up automatically But people aren't machines—"

"I *remember* putting it away, Franklin."

" D o you *remember* putting your shoes on this morning, do you *remember* closing the door behind you w h e n you left the house? H o w many times have we been in the car, and we've had to go back inside and make sure that the stove isn't on? W h e n turning it off is presumably second nature?"

" B u t the stove is never on, is it? It's almost a rule of life, a, what, some kind of fortune-cookie aphorism: T h e Stove Is Never O n . "

"I'll tell you w h e n it's on, Eva: the *one time* that you don't bother to double-check. A n d *that* is w h e n the fucking house burns down."

" W h y are we having this inane conversation? W i t h our daughter in the hospital?"

"I want you to admit it. I ' m not saying I won't forgive you. I k n o w you must feel terrible. But part of getting through this has to be facing u p — "

"Janis came this morning, maybe *she* left it out." In truth, I never thought for a m o m e n t that Janis had been so sloppy, but I was desperate to keep at bay the picture that began to f o r m in my head w h e n I entertained a more credible suspect.

"Janis had no need for drain cleaner. All the drains were clear."

"All right," I said, steeling myself. " T h e n ask *Kevin* h o w that bottle got left out."

"I k n e w we'd get around to this. First it's oh, what a mystery, then it's the housekeeper's fault, who's left? And, what a surprise, that E v a — w h o never does anything w r o n g herself—should finger her o w n son!"

" H e was supposed to be taking care of her. *You* said he was old e n o u g h — "

"Yes, it was on his watch. But she was in the bathroom, he says

the door was closed, and we've hardly encouraged our fourteen-year-old boy to bust in on his sister in the john."

"Franklin, this story doesn't add up. Never mind for n o w why it was out, all right? Forget that. But w h y would Celia p o u r drain cleaner in her *own eye?"*

"I haven't a clue! Maybe because kids are not only d u m b but creative and the combination is death. W h y else would we keep that shit locked up? What's important is Kevin did everything he should have. He says w h e n she started to scream he came running, and w h e n he found out what it was he ran water over her face and rinsed her eye the best he could, and *then* he called an ambulance, *even* before he called me on the cell—which was *just* right, the order was *just* right, he was a *star."*

" H e didn't call me," I said.

"Well," you said. "I wonder why."

" T h e damage—" I took a breath. "It's bad, isn't it. It had to have been very, very bad—." I had started to cry, but I made myself stop, because I had to get this out. "If she's lost the eye, and surgeons are better at this kind of thing than they used to be, then it was—. It was a mess. It takes, ah. It takes a while." I stopped again, hstening to the *wah* from the heat vents.The air

had grown dry, my saliva sticky. "It takes a while for that stuff to work. That's w h y the label tells you t o — t o let it sit."

Compulsively, I had pressed my fingertips against my o w n eyes, padding the papery lids, guarding the smooth, tender roll of the balls.

" W h a t are you saying? Because it's bad enough to accuse him of neglect —"

" T h e doctor said there'd be scarring! That she was burned, all across that side of her face! Time, it would have taken time!

Maybe he did wash it out, but *when*? W h e n he was *finished?"*

You grabbed each of my arms, raised t h e m on either side of my head, and looked me in the eye. "Finished with what? His homework? His archery practice?"

"Finished," I groaned, "with *Celia."*

" D o n ' t you ever say that again! N o t to anyone! N o t even to m e ! "

" T h i n k about it!" I wrenched my arms free with a twist.

"Celia, douse herself with acid? Celia's afraid of everything! A n d she's six, she's n o t *two.* I k n o w you don't think she's very smart, but she's not retarded! She knows not to touch the stove, and she doesn't eat bleach. Meanwhde, Kevin can reach that cabinet, and Kevin can work chdd-locks in his sleep. He's n o t her *savior.* He did it! O h , Franklin, he did i t — "

" I ' m ashamed of you, *ashamed,"* you said at my back as I curled against the door. "Demonizing your o w n kid just because you can't admit to your o w n carelessness. It's worse than craven. It's sick.

Here you're flailing around making *outrageous* accusations, and as usual you have no proof.That doctor—-did he say anything about Kevin's story not squaring with her injuries? N o . N o , he didn't.

Only his m o t h e r can detect a cover-up of some unspeakable evd because she's such a medical expert, such an expert on corrosive chemicals because she's occasionally cleaned house."

As ever, you couldn't keep shouting at me w h d e I was crying.

"Look," you implored. "You don't k n o w what you're saying because you're upset. You're not yourself. This is hard, and it's going to keep being hard, because you're going to have to look at it. She's going to be in pain, and it's going to look nasty for a while. T h e only thing that's going to make it easier is if you confront your part in this. Celia—even *Celia*, with that elephant shrew—admits it's her fault. She left the cage open! A n d that's part of it, what hurts, that not only did something sad happen but if she'd done something differently it wouldn't have happened.

She takes responsibdity, and she's only six! *Why can't you?"*

"I wish I could take responsibility," I whispered, fogging the side window. "I'd say, ' O h , I could kill myself for leaving that drain cleaner w h e r e she could find it!' D o n ' t you see h o w m u c h easier that w o u l d be? *Why* would I be so upset? If it were my fault, *only* my fault? In that case, it wouldn't be frightening.

Franklin, this is serious, it's not just a litde girl scratching her

eczema anymore. I don't h o w he got this way but he's a horror, and he *hates her—"*

"That's enough! "Your announcement had a liturgical finality, deep and b o o m i n g hke the ringing *Amen* in a benedictory prayer.

"I don't often lay d o w n the law. But Kevin's been through an incredible trauma. His sister will never be the same. He kept his head in a crisis, and I want him to be proud of that. Still, he was the one baby-sitting, and he's inevitably going to w o r r y that it was all his fault. So you are going to promise me, right now, that you'll do everything in your power to assure him that it *wasn't."*

I pulled the handle of the door and opened it a few inches. I thought, I have to get out of here, I have to get away.

" D o n ' t go, not yet," you said, holding my arm. "I want you to promise."

"Promise to keep my m o u t h shut or to believe his feeble story? I might add, another one."

"I can't make you believe in your o w n s o n . T h o u g h I've sure as fuck tried."

On one point you were right: I didn't have any proof. O n l y Celia's face. Hadn't I been right. She'd never be beautiful, w o u l d she.

I climbed from the truck and faced you through the open door. T h e chill w i n d whipping my hair, I stood at attention, reminded of brittle military truces struck between mistrustful generals in the middle of barren battlefields.

"All right," I said. "We'll call it an accident.You can even tell him, ' I ' m afraid your mother forgot to put the Liquid-Plumr away on Saturday.' After all, he knew I unclogged that drain. But in return you promise me: that we will never again leave Kevin alone with Ceha. N o t for five minutes."

"Fine. I bet Kevin's none too keen for more baby-sitting jobs right n o w anyway."

I said I'd see you at home; a civil farewell was an effort.

"Eva!" you called at my back, and I turned. "You k n o w I ' m not usually big on shrinks. But maybe you should talk to

somebody. I think you need help. That's not an accusation. It's just—you're right on one score.This is getting serious. I ' m afraid it's beyond me."

Indeed it was.

T h e following couple of weeks were eerdy quiet around the house, with Celia still recovering in the hospital.You and I spoke little. I'd ask what you'd like for dinner; you'd say you didn't care.

In relation to Celia, we largely addressed logistics—when each of us would visit. Although it seemed sensible for us to go separately so that she'd have companionship for m o r e of the day, the truth was that neither of us was anxious to share your overheated 4x4

once more. Back home, we could discuss the particulars of her condition, and though the particulars were distressing—an infection subsequent to her *enucleation,* a vocabulary lesson I could have skipped, had further damaged the optic nerve and ruled out a transplant— facts fed the conversational maw. Shopping for an oculist for her follow-up, I seized on a doctor named Krikor Sahatjian on the U p p e r East Side. Armenians look out for each other, I assured you. He'll give us special attention. "So would Dr.

Kevorkian," you grunted, well aware that the godfather of assisted suicide was one Armenian my conservative community was reluctant to claim. Still, I was grateful for an exchange that almost qualified as banter, in conspicuous short supply.

I remember being on my best behavior, never raising my voice, never objecting w h e n you barely touched a meal that I'd have gone to great trouble to fix. Cooking, I tried not to make too m u c h noise, muffling the clang of a knocked pot. In respect to Ceha's uncanndy sunny disposition in Nyack Hospital, I swallowed many an admiring remark for seeming somehow indecorous, as if her improbable good nature were an affront to lesser mortals w h o quite reasonably wad from pain and grow irascible

during convalescence. In our household, my praise of our daughter always seemed to get confused with bragging on my o w n account. Throughout, I made a concerted effort to *act*

normal, which, along with *trying* to have f u n and *trying* to be a good mother, we can n o w add to our list of projects that are inherently doomed.

That remark you made about my "needing help" proved disquieting. I had replayed the m e m o r y of putting that Liquid-Plumr away so many times that the tape was w o r n and I couldn't quite trust it. I would review my suspicions and sometimes they didn't...well, nothing would seem clear-cut. *Did* I put that bottle away? *Was* the injury too severe for the story the way Kevin told it? Could I point to a single shred of solid evidence that would hold up in court? I didn't want to "talk to somebody," but I'd have given my eye teeth to be able to talk to you.

It was only a couple of days after the *accident* w h e n you convened our roundtable of three. We'd just had dinner, loosely speaking; Kevin had shoveled his food directly from the stove.

H u m o r i n g you, he assumed his rueful, sideways slouch at the dining table. Having been unwillingly s u m m o n e d to this convocation as well, I felt hke a kid myself, once m o r e forced at age nine to formally apologize to M r . W i n t e r g r e e n for pilfering drops from the walnut tree in his front yard. Sneaking a glance at Kevin, I wanted to say, *Wipe that smirk off your face, this isn't a joke; your sister's in the hospital.* I wanted to say, *Go put on a T-shirt that isn't five sizes too small for you, just being in the same room with that getup makes me itch.* B u t I couldn't. In the culture of o u r family, such commonplace parental admonitions, from me anyway, were impermissible.

"In case you're nervous, Kev," you began (though he didn't look nervous to me),"this isn't an inquisition.We mostly want to tell you h o w much you impressed us with your quick thinking.

W h o knows, if you hadn't called those medics in right away, it could have been even worse." *(How?* I t h o u g h t . T h o u g h I suppose she could've taken a bath in it.) "And your m o t h e r has something she wants to tell you."

"I wanted to thank you," I began, avoiding Kevin's eye, "for getting your sister to the hospital."

"Tell him what you told me," you prompted. " R e m e m b e r , you said you were concerned, that he might feel, you k n o w .

This part was easy. I looked at h i m straight on. "I thought you probably felt responsible."

Unflinching, he squinted back, and I confronted my o w n wide-bridged nose, my narrow jaw, my shelved brow and dusky complexion. I was looking in the mirror, yet I had no idea what my o w n reflection was thinking. "Why's that?"

"Because you were *supposed* to be taking care of her!"

"But you wanted to remind him," you said, "that we'd never expected him to watch her every single minute, and accidents happen, and so it *wasn't* his fault. W h a t you told me. You know.

In the truck."

It was exactly like apologizing to Mr. Wintergreen. W h e n I was nine, I'd wanted to blurt, *Most of those stupid walnuts were wormy or rotten, you old coot,* but instead I'd promised to harvest a full peck of his c r u m m y nuts and return t h e m fully shelled.

"We don't want you to blame yourself." My tone duplicated Kevin's own, w h e n he'd spoken to the police— *sir* this, *sir* that.

" I ' m the one at fault. I should never have left the Liquid-Plumr out of the cabinet."

Kevin shrugged. "Never said I blamed myself." He stood up.

"I be excused?"

" O n e more thing," you said. "Your sister's going to need your help."

" W h y ? " he said, ranging into the kitchen. " O n l y one eye, wasn't it. N o t like she needs a guide dog or a white stick."

"Yes," I said. *"Lucky her."*

"She'll need your support," you said. "She's going to have to wear a p a t c h — "

"Cool," he said. He came back with the bag of lychees from the refrigerator. It was February; they were in season.

"She'll be fitted with a glass eye d o w n the line," you said, "but we'd appreciate your sticking up for her if neighborhood kids tease h e r — "

"Like how?" he said, carefully pulling the rough salmon-colored husk off the fruit, exposing the pinkish-white flesh.

"Celia does not look like a geek?" W h e n the pale translucent orb was peeled, he p o p p e d it in his m o u t h , sucked, and pulled it back out.

"Well, however y o u — "

"I mean, *Dad!'* Methodically, he splayed the lychee open, parting the slippery flesh from the smooth brown seed. " N o t sure you remember too good, being a kid." He angled the mangle into his m o u t h . "Ceil s just gonna have to suck it up."

I could feel you internally beaming. H e r e was your teenager trotting out his archetypal teenagery toughness, behind w h i c h he hid his confused, conflicted feelings about his sister's tragic accident. It was an act, Franklin, a candy-coated savagery for your consumption. He was plenty confused and

conflicted, but if you looked into his pupils they were thick and sticky as a tar pit. This teenage angst of his, it wasn't *cute.*

"Hey, Mister Plastic," Kevin offered. "Want one?" You demurred.

"I didn't k n o w you liked lychees," I said tightly once he'd started on a second one.

"Yeah, well," he said, stripping the fruit bare and rolling the pulpy globe around the table with one forefinger. It was the ghosdy, milky color of a cataract.

"It's just, they're very delicate," I said, fretting.

He tore into the lychee with his front teeth. "Yeah, whadda you call it." He slurped. " A n *acquired taste!'*

He was clearly planning to go through the whole bag. I rushed from the room, and he laughed.

On the days that I took the early afternoon visiting hours, I worked from home; Kevin's school bus would often drop h i m off at the same time as I returned from the hospital. T h e first time I passed him as he sauntered languidly across Palisades Parade, I pulled over in my Luna and offered him a ride up our steep drive.

You'd think that just being alone with your own son in a car was a pretty ordinary affair, especially for two minutes. But Kevin and I rarely put ourselves in such stifling proximity, and I remember babbling associatively all the way up. T h e street was lined with several other vehicles waiting to rescue chddren from having to walk as m u c h as ten feet on their o w n steam, and I remarked on the fact that every single car was an *SRO.* It was out of my m o u t h before I remembered that Kevin hated my teasing

malapropism for S U V — o n e more pretend-gaffe to service the myth that I didn't really live here.

"You know, those things are a metaphor for this whole country," I went on. I had been put on notice that this sort of talk drove my son insane, but maybe that's why I pursued it, m u c h as I would later bring up Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris in Claverack just to goad him. " T h e y sit up on the road higher and mightier than anyone else, and they have more power than anyone knows what to do with. Even the profile they c u t — they always remind me of fat shoppers, waddling d o w n the mall in square-cut Bermuda shorts and giant padded sneakers, stuffing their faces with cinnamon buns."

"Yeah, well, ever ride in one?" (I admitted I hadn't.) "So what do you know?"

"I k n o w they piggy up too m u c h of the road, guzzle gas, sometimes roll over—"

" W h y do you care if they roll over? You hate these people anyway."

"I don't h a t e — "

"Single-room occupancy!" Shaking his head, he slammed the VW door behind him. T h e next time I offered him a lift up the hill, he waved me off.

There was even something strangely unbearable about those couple of hours he and I sometimes shared the house before your 4x4 plowed into the garage.You'd think it would be easy enough, in that vast splay of teak, but no matter where each of us settled I never lost an awareness of his presence, nor he, I suspect, of mine.

— 3 4 9 —

Lacking you and Celia as a buffer, just the two of us in the same residence felt—the word *naked* comes to mind. We barely spoke.

If he headed for his room, I didn't ask about his homework; if Lenny stopped by, I didn't ask what they were doing; and if Kevin left the house, I didn't ask where he was headed. I told myself that a parent should respect an adolescent's privacy, but I also k n e w that I was a coward.

This sensation of nakedness was assisted by the real thing. I k n o w that fourteen-year-old boys are b r i m m i n g with hormones, all that. I k n o w that masturbation is a normal, vital relief, a harmless and enjoyable pastime that shouldn't be slandered as a vice. But I also thought that for teenagers—let's be serious, for everyone—this entertainment is covert. We all do it (or I used to—yes, once in a while, Franklin, what did you think?), we all k n o w we all do it, but it isn't customary to say, "Honey, could you keep an eye on the spaghetti sauce, because I ' m going to go masturbate."

It had to happen more than once for me to finally mention it, because after our set-to in the hospital parking lot I had blown my tattling allowance for several months.

" H e leaves the bathroom door open," I reported reluctandy in our bedroom late one night, at which point you began to brush the hairs from your electric shaver intently. " A n d you can see the toilet from the hallway."

"So he forgets to close the door."You were clipped.

" H e doesn't forget. He waits until I go to the kitchen to fix a cup of coffee, so I'll see him on my way back to my study. It's very deliberate. And he's, ah—loud."

"At his age, I probably jerked off three times a day."

"In front of your mother?"

"Around the corner, behind the door. I thought I kept it secret, but I ' m sure she knew."

"Behind the door," I noted. " T h e door. It's important." My, that shaver was really clogged with stubble tonight. " K n o w i n g I can see—I think it excites him."

"Well, no matter h o w *healthy* you try to be about it, everybody's a little weird in this department."

"You're not, um—getting it. I k n o w he's going to do it, I don't have a problem with his doing it, but I'd rather not be included. It's inappropriate." That word took heavy duty during this era. T h e Monica Lewinsky scandal had broken the m o n t h before, and President Clinton would later put a napkin over the specifics by deeming their relations *inappropriate.*

"So why don't you say something?" You got tired of intercession, I suppose.

" W h a t if Ceha were masturbating in front of you? Would you talk to her about it or prefer that I did?"

"So what do you want me to say?" you asked wearily.

" T h a t he's making me uncomfortable."

"That's a n e w one."

I flounced onto the bed and grabbed a b o o k I'd be unable to read. "Just tell h i m to keep the goddamned door shut."

I shouldn't have bothered. Yes, you reported that you'd done as you were told. I pictured you poking your head into his room and saying something jovial and collusive about "growing a little hair on the palm," a dated expression he probably didn't get, and then I bet you tossed off, super-casual,"Just remember it's private, okay sport?" and said good-night. But even if you instead had a long, earnest, stern discussion, you'd have tipped h i m off that he'd gotten to me, and with Kevin that's always a mistake.

So the very next afternoon after your "talk," I ' m heading to the study with my cup of coffee and I can hear a telltale grunting d o w n the hall. I ' m praying that he's gotten the message and there will at least be a thin but blessed w o o d e n barrier between me and my son's budding manhood. I

think: Aside from closets, there are only about four, five doors in the whole bloody house, and we should really be getting our money's w o r t h out of them. But as I advance another step or two the noise level behes this most minimal attempt at propriety.

I press my w a r m coffee cup between my eyes to soothe a nascent headache. I've been married for nineteen years and I know how men work and there's no reason to be afraid of a glorified spigot. But subjected to the urgent litde moans down the hall, I'm ten years old again, sent on errands across town for my shut-in mother, having to cut through the park, eyes trained straight ahead while older boys snicker in the bushes with their flies down. I feel stalked, in my own house, nervous, hounded, and mocked, and I don't mind telling you I'm pretty pissed off about it.

So I dare myself, the way I always got home in the old days, when I would discipline myself not to run and so give chase.

I march rather than tiptoe down the hall, heels hitting the floorboards, clop-clop. I get to the kids' bathroom, door agape, and there is our firstborn in all his pubescent splendor, down to a rash of fiery pimples on his backside. Feet planted wide and back arched, he has pivoted his stance at an angle to the toilet so that I can see his handiwork—purple and gleaming with what I first assume is K - Y jelly, but which the silver wrapper on the floor suggests is my Land O'Lakes unsalted butter—and this is my introduction to the fact that my son has now grown fine, uncommonly straight pubic hair. Though most males conduct this exercise with their eyes closed, Kevin has cracked his open, the better to shoot his mother a sly, sleepy glance over the shoulder. In return, I glare squarely at his cock—doubtless what I should have done in the park instead of averting my gaze, since the appendage is so unimpressive when confronted head-on that it makes you wonder what all the fuss is about. I reach in and pull the door shut, hard.

T h e hallway rings with a dry chuckle. I clip back to the kitchen. I've spilled coffee on my skirt.

So. I know you must have wondered. W h y didn't I simply walk out? Nothing stopped me from grabbing Celia while she still had one eye left

and hightailing it back to Tribeca. I could have left you with your son and that horrible house, a matched set. After all, I had all the money.

— 352 —

I'm not sure you'll believe me, but it never occurred to me to leave. I may have spent long enough in your orbit to have absorbed your ferocious conviction that a happy family cannot be a mere myth or that even if it is, better to die trying for the fine if unattainable than sulking in passive, cynical resignation that hell is other people you're related to. I hated the prospect of defeat; if in bearing Kevin to begin with I picked up my own gauntlet, bearing Kevin on a daily basis involved rising to a greater challenge still. And there may have been a practical side to my tenacity as well. He was about to turn fifteen. He had never spoken of college—had never spoken of his adult future at all; never having expressed the slightest interest in a trade or profession, for all I knew he was sticking to his five-year-old vow to go on welfare. But theoretically our son was out of the house in about three years. Thereafter, it would just be you, me, and Ceha, and then we would see about that happy family of yours. Those three years are almost over now, and if they have proved the longest of my life, I had no way of anticipating that at the time. Lastly, and this may strike you as simplistic, I loved you.

I loved you, Franklin. I still do.

Nevertheless, I did feel under siege. My daughter had been half blinded, my husband doubted my sanity, and my son was flouting his butter-greased penis in my face. Abetting the sensation of assault from all sides, Mary Woolford chose this of all times to make her first indignant visit to our house—and the last, come to think of it, since the next time we'd meet would be in court.

She was still whippet slim then, her dark hair jet to the roots so I'd never have known it was dyed; the way it was pinned up was a tad severe. Even to make this neighborly call she was dressed to the nines in a Chanel suit, a demure jeweled spray on her lapel twinkling with respectability. Who'd

have guessed that a scant three years later she'd be shambhng the Nyack Grand Union in a streaked outfit that needed pressing and vandalizing raw eggs in the child seat of another woman's cart.

She introduced herself curtly, and, despite the chill, declined an

invitation inside."My daughter, Laura, is a lovely girl," she said. "A mother would naturally think so, but I believe her attractiveness is also apparent to others. With two important exceptions: Laura herself, and that young man of yours."

I wanted to reassure the woman that by and large, my surly son failed to see the attractiveness of anyone, but I sensed that we were still in the preamble. This sounds unkind considering that my son would, in just over a year, murder this woman's daughter, but I'm afraid I took an immediate dislike to Mary Woolford. She moved jaggedly, her eyes shifting this way and that, as if roiling from some constant inner turmoil.Yet some people coddle their own afflictions the way others spoil small pedigreed dogs with cans of pate. Mary struck me straight off as one of this sort, for w h o m my private shorthand was Looking for a Problem—rather a waste of detective powers I always thought, since in my experience most proper problems come looking for you.

"For the last year or so," Mary continued, "Laura has suffered under the misapprehension that she is overweight. I'm sure you've read about the condition. She skips meals, she buries her breakfast in the trash, and lies about having eaten at a friend's. Laxative abuse, diet pills—suffice it to say that it's all very frightening.

Last September she got so frail that she was hospitalized with an intravenous drip, which she would tear out if not watched round the clock. Are you getting the picture?"

I mumbled something feebly commiserating. I would

normally lend a sympathetic ear to such stories, though just then I couldn't help thinking that my daughter was in the hospital, too, and not—I was fiercely convinced—because she done anything stupid to herself. Besides, I'd heard too many Karen Carpenter tales at Gladstone PTA meetings, and they often took the f o r m of boasts. T h e prestigious diagnosis of anorexia seemed much coveted not only by the students but by their mothers, w h o would compete over whose daughter ate less. No wonder the poor girls were a mess.

"We had been making progress," Mary continued. "For the last few m o n t h s she's submitted to her modest portions at famdy meals, w h i c h she is compelled to attend. She's finally gained a little weight back—as your son Kevin was *more than eager to point out"*

I sighed. In comparison to our visitor, I must have looked haggard.What I wouldn't have looked is surprised, and my failure to gasp oh-my-goodness-me-what-has-that-boy-done seemed to indame her.

"Last night I caught my beautiful daughter vomiting her dinner! I got her to admit, too, that she's been making herself upchuck for the last week. *Why?* O n e of the boys at school keeps telling her she's *fat*\ Barely 100 pounds and she's tormented for being a 'porker'! Now, it wasn't easy to get his name out of her, and she begged me not to come here tonight. But I for one believe it's time we parents start accepting responsibility for our chddren's destructive behavior. My husband and I are doing everything we can to keep Laura from hurting herself. So you and your husband might please keep your son from hurting her, too!"

My head bobbed like one of those dogs in car windows. " H o -

ow?" I drawled. It's possible she thought I was drunk.

"I don't care h o w — ! "

" D o you want us to *talk to him?"* I had to tighten the corners of my m o u t h to keep t h e m from curling into an incredulous smirk all too reminiscent of Kevin himself.

"I should think so!"

"Tell h i m to be *sensitive to the feelings of others* and to *remember the Golden Rule?"* I was leaning on the d o o r j a m b with something close to a leer, and Mary stepped back in alarm. " O r maybe my husband could have a *man-to-man chat,* and teach our son that a *real man* isn't cruel and aggressive, but a *real man* is gentle and compassionate?"

I had to stop for a second to keep from laughing. I suddenly pictured you jaunting into the kitchen to report, *Well, honey, it was all a big misunderstanding! Kevin says that poor skin-and-bones Laura Woolford simply heard wrong! He didn't call her "fat," he called her "fab"! And he didn't say she was a "porker"—he said she told a joke that was a "corker"!* A grin must have leaked out despite me, because Mary turned purple and exploded, "I cannot for the hfe of me understand w h y you seem to think this is funny!"

"Ms.Woolford, do you have any boys?"

"Laura is our only child," she said reverently.

" T h e n I'll refer you back to old schoolyard rhymes as to just what *little boys are made of* I'd like to help you out, but practically?

If Franklin and I say anything to Kevin, the consequences for your daughter at school will be even worse. Maybe it's better you teach Laura—what do the kids say? To *suck it up!'*

I would pay for this b o u t of realism later, though I could hardly have k n o w n then that my hard-bitten counsel would be trotted out in Mary's testimony at the civil trial two years h e n c e — w i t h a few acid embellishments for good measure.

"Well, thank you for nothing!"

Watching Mary harumph down the flagstones, I reflected on the fact that you, Kevin's teachers, and n o w this M a r y Woolford w o m a n were regaling me that as a mother I must *accept responsibility.*

Fair enough. But if I was so all-fired responsible, w h y did I still feel so helpless?

Celia came h o m e at the beginning of March. Kevin had never been to visit her once; protective, I'd never encouraged him.

You'd issued the odd invitation to come along, but backed off in deference to his trauma. He never even asked h o w she was doing, you know. Anyone listening in wouldn't have thought he had a sister.

I had only made modest headway in accommodating myself to her n e w appearance. T h e burns spattered on her cheek and streaked across her temple, though starting to heal, were still crusty, and I begged her not to pick at t h e m lest she make the scarring even worse. She was good about it, and I thought ofVioletta.

Hitherto out of touch with monocular fashions, I'd expected her eye patch to be black, and Shirley Temple flashbacks of *The Good*

Ship Lollipop may have comforted me with anodyne visions of my little blond pirate. I think I'd have preferred a black one, too, so that I might have run out to buy her a three-cornered hat and made some pathetic attempt at turning this macabre nightmare into a fancy-dress game to distract her.

Instead, the flesh color of those stick-on 3M Opticlude patches turned the left-hand side of her face blank. Swelling on the left side obliterated any defining structures like her cheekbone. It was as if her face wasn't quite three-dimensional anymore, but rather hke a postcard, with a picture on one side and clean white paper on the other. I could catch a glimpse of her right-hand profile, and for a m o m e n t my cheerful moppet was unchanged; with a glimpse of the left, she was erased.

This now-you-see-me, n o w - y o u - d o n ' t quality to her c o u n -

tenance gave expression to my painful n e w awareness that children were a perishable consumer good. T h o u g h I don't think I had ever taken her for granted, once she came h o m e I pretty m u c h gave up on whatever effort I had ever made to disguise my preference for one child over the other. She could never bring herself to leave my side any longer, and I allowed her to shadow me softly around the house and j o i n me on errands. I ' m sure you were right that we shouldn't have let her shp any further behind in school and that the sooner she got used to her disability in public the better, but I still t o o k some time off from AWAP and kept her h o m e for two more weeks. Meanwhile, she lost some of the skills she had mastered, for instance, tying her tennis shoes, and I'd have to go back to tying them for her and start the lesson from scratch.

I watched her around Kevin like a hawk. I admit that she did not act afraid of him. A n d he went right back to issuing her a plenitude of bored orders; ever since she'd gotten old enough to run and fetch, he'd treated her hke a pet w i t h a limited range of tricks. But even in response to some small, harmless request hke to grab h i m a cracker or toss h i m the TV remote, I thought I n o w detected in his sister a momentary hesitation, a litde freeze, like a

hard swallow. And though she had once begged to carry his quiver and felt honored to help him prize his arrows from the target out back, the first time he casually suggested that she resume these duties, I put my foot down: I k n e w he was careful, but Celia had only one eye left and she was n o t to go near that archery range.

I had expected Celia to whimper. She was always desperate to prove of use to him and had loved to watch her brother stand Hiawatha-tall and release those arrows unerringly into the bull's-eye. Instead she shot me a glance that looked grateful, and her hairline glistened from a light sweat.

I was surprised w h e n he invited her out to play Frisbee—play with his sister, n o w that was a first—and even a little impressed.

So I told her it was all right so long as she wore her safety glasses; my relationship to her good eye n o w was hysterical. But w h e n a few minutes later I looked out the window, he was *playing with* his sister only in the sense that one plays with the Frisbee itself. Ceha's depth perception was still very poor, and she kept grabbing for the Frisbee before it had reached her, missing, and then it would hit her in the chest. Very funny.

Of course, the hardest part at first was addressing that hole in Celia's head, which had to be swabbed frequently with baby shampoo and a moistened Q - T i p . W h i l e Dr. Sahatjian assured us that the secretions w o u l d subside once the prosthesis was fitted and the healing complete, at first the cavity oozed that yellowish discharge continually, and sometimes in the m o r n i n g I'd have to soak the area with a wet Kleenex because the lid w o u l d have crusted shut in her sleep.The lid itself sagged— *sulcus,* her oculist called it—and was also puffy, especially since it had b e e n damaged by the acid and had been partially reconstructed w i t h a small flap of skin from Ceha's inner thigh. (Apparently eyelid augmentation has developed into a fine art because of high demand in Japan for anghfication of Oriental features, w h i c h in better days I'd have f o u n d a horrifying testimony to the powers of Western advertising.) T h e swelling and slight

purpling made her look like one of those battered children in posters that encourage you to t u r n in y o u r neighbors to the police. W i t h one eyelid depressed and her other eye open, she seemed to be w i n k i n g hugely, as if we shared a lurid secret.

I'd told Sahatjian that I wasn't sure I could bring myself to clean that hollow daily; he assured me that I'd get used to it.

He was right in the long run, but I fought a swell of nausea w h e n I first lifted the lid myself w i t h my t h u m b . If it wasn't quite as harrowing as I'd feared, it was disturbing on a subtler level. No one was h o m e . T h e effect recalled those almond-eyed Modiglianis w h o s e absence of pupils give the figures a hypnotic mildness and tranquillity, t h o u g h a

dolorousness as well, and a hint of stupidity. T h e cavity w e n t f r o m pink at the r i m to a merciful black toward the back, but w h e n I got her under the light to administer her antibiotic drops, I could see that incongruous plastic conformer, w h i c h kept the socket from collapsing; I might have been staring into a doll.

I k n o w you resented my fawning over her so m u c h , and that you felt bad for resenting it. In compensation, you were firmly affectionate w i t h Celia, drawing her into your lap, reading her stories. Me, I recognized t o o well the mark of deliberateness about these efforts—so this was *trying to be a good father*—but I d o u b t that it looked to Kevin like anything other than surfaces w o u l d suggest. Clearly his little sister's injury had w o n h e r only m o r e d o t i n g — m o r e *Do you need an extra blanket, honey?* m o r e *Would you like another piece of cake?* m o r e *Why don't we let Celia stay up, Franklin, it's an animal show.* C h e c k i n g o u t the tableau in the living r o o m as Celia fell asleep in the crook of y o u r arm and Kevin glared at " M y Granny H a d My Boyfriend's Baby" on Jerry Springer, I thought, *Didn't our little stratagem backfire.*

In case you're wondering, I did n o t ply Celia unduly for details about that a f t e r n o o n in the b a t h r o o m . I was every bit as shy of discussing the matter as she was; neither of us had any desire to relive that day. Yet o u t of a sense of parental obligation—I didn't want her to think the subject taboo, in case its exploration would prove therapeutic—I did ask her just once, casually, " W h e n you got hurt? What happened?"

"Kevin—." She pawed at the lid with the back of her wrist; it itched, but lest she dislodge the conformer she had learned to always rub toward her nose. "I got something in my eye. Kevin helped me wash it out."

That's all she ever said.

M A R C H 1 1 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

It looks as if that Andy Williams thing sparked off a rash of copycat crimes. But then, they're all copycat crimes, don't you agree?

There were four more School Shootings that spring of 1998.

I remember clearly w h e n news came in of the first one, because that was the same day Dr. Sahatjian did the drawings for Celia's prosthesis and then took a mold of her socket. Celia was entranced w h e n he painstakingly painted the iris of her good eye by hand; I was surprised that it wasn't scanned by computer, but still limned with fine brushes in watercolors. Iris-painting is apparently quite an art, since every eye is as unique as a fingerprint, and even the whites of our eyes have a distinctive color, their fine red veins a personal skein. It was certainly the only element of this agonizing process that could have passed for charming.

As for the mold making, we'd been assured that it wouldn't be painful, though she might experience "discomfort," a t e r m beloved of the medical profession that seems to be a synonym for agony that isn't yours. T h o u g h the stuffing of her socket with white putty was indisputably unpleasant, she merely mewled a little; she never really cried. Celia's bravery was peculiarly disproportionate. She was a stoic little trooper w h e n she lost an eye. She still screamed bloody murder if she spotted mildew on the shower curtain.

As his assistant restored the conformer and applied a fresh eye patch, I asked Krikor Sahatjian idly what drew h i m to this niche occupation. He volunteered that at age twelve, w h e n taking a shortcut through a neighbor s yard, he had climbed over a spiked fence; he shpped, and the tip of an arrow-shaped iron rod...Leaving the rest mercifully to my imagination, he said, "I was so fascinated by the process of making my o w n prosthesis that I decided I'd found my calling." Incredulous, I looked again at his soulful brown eyes, reminiscent of O m a r Sharif s. "You're surprised," he said amiably. "I hadn't noticed," I admitted. "You'll find that's common," he said. " O n c e the prosthesis is in, many people will never k n o w that Celia is monocular. And there are ways of covering it u p — m o v i n g your head instead of your eyes to look at someone. I'll teach her, w h e n she's ready." I was grateful. For the first time her *enucleation* didn't seem like the end of

the world, and I even wondered if the distinction the disability conferred, and the strength it could summon, might help Celia grow into herself.

W h e n Celia and I returned from the U p p e r East Side, you'd gotten h o m e before us and were setded in the den with Kevin in front of one of those N i c k at Night back-to-back binges of *Happy Days*. I commented in the doorway, "Ah, the 1950s that never were. I keep waiting for somebody to tell R o n Howard about Sputnik, McCarthyism, and the arms race." I added ruefully,

" T h o u g h I see you two are *bonding!'*

In those days, I always lavished a laden irony on trendy American buzz phrases, as if picking t h e m up with rubber gloves. In kind, I had explained to Kevin's English teacher that the misuse of the word *literally* was " o n e of my issues" with an exaggerated w i n k - a n d - n o d that must only have perplexed the woman. I'd always thought of American culture as a spectator sport, on which I could pass j u d g m e n t from the elevated bleachers of my internationalism. But these days I join in aping beer advertisements w h e n my workmates at Travel R Us cry in unison, *Whass uuuuup?,* I use *impact* as a transitive verb, and I omit prissy quotation marks. R e a l culture you don't observe but embody. I

live here. As I would soon discover in spades, there is no o p t - o u t clause.

O u r son, however, could read all the above and more into my disdainful pronunciation of *bonding*. "Is there anything, or anybody," he asked, looking me in the eye, "you don't feel superior to?"

"I've been candid with you about my problems with this country," I said stiffly, leaving little doubt that this candor was the source of regret, and making perhaps my sole allusion since to our disastrous dinner at H u d s o n House. "But I don't k n o w what gives you the idea that I feel 'superior.'"

"Ever notice you never talk about Americans as 'we'?" he said. "It's always 'they.' Like you'd talk about the Chinese or something."

"I've spent a large amount of my adulthood out of the country, and I probably—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Kevin broke eye contact and stared back at the screen. "I just want to k n o w what makes you think you're so *special."*

"Eva, grab a seat and join the fun!" you said. "This is the one where Richie's forced to blind-date the boss's daughter, so he gets Potsie—"

"Meaning you've seen it twenty times," I chided affectionately, thankful for your rescue. " H o w many *Happy Days* has it been in a row now, three or four?"

"This is the first one! Five more to go!"

"Before I forget, Franklin—I got Dr. Sahatjian to agree to glass." Petting Celia's fine blond hair as she h u n g on my leg, I refrained from citing glass-what. It had fallen to me earlier that afternoon to disabuse our daughter of the expectation that her n e w eye would be able to see.

"E-va,"you sang, not in the m o o d for a fight. "Polymer is state of the a-art."

"So is this G e r m a n Cryolite."

"Fewer infec-tions, less chance of brea-kage—"

"Polymer's just a fancy name for plastic. I hate plastic." I closed the argument, *"Materials are everything."*

"Look at that," you pointed out to Kevin. " R i c h i e sleazes out of the date, and it turns out she's a hottie."

I didn't want to p o o p your party, but the mission from w h i c h I'd just returned was pretty grim, and I couldn't immediately start m u n c h i n g your visual j u n k food. "Franklin, it's almost seven. Can we please watch the news?"

"Bor-ing," you cried.

" N o t lately it isn't." Monica-gate was still breaking in prurient slow motion. "Lately it's X-rated. Kevin?" I turned politely to our son. "Would you m i n d very m u c h if, after this episode is over, we switched to the news?"

Kevin was slumped in the easy chair, eyes at half-mast.

"Whatever."

You sang along with the signature tune, *Monday, Tuesday, happy days...!* as I knelt to pick white putty from Celia's hairline. At the hour, I switched to J i m Lehrer. It was the lead story. For once our president would have to keep his fly zipped to make way for two unpleasant little boys in his h o m e state, the older of w h o m was all of thirteen, the younger only eleven.

I groaned, flopping onto the leather couch. " N o t another

>>

one.

Outside Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas, Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden had lain in wait, huddled in the bushes in camouflage outfits after setting off the school's fire alarm. As students and teachers exited the building, the two opened fire with a R u g e r .44-caliber rifle and a 30.06 hunting rifle, killing four girls and one teacher, and injuring eleven other students. Himself wounded, if only by romantic disappointment, the older boy had apparently warned a friend the day before with cinematic swashbuckling, "I got some killin' to do," while little Andrew Golden had sworn to a confidant that he was planning to shoot "all the girls who'd ever

broken up with him." A single boy was injured; the other fifteen victims were female.

— 364 —

"Fucking idiots," I growled.

"Yo, Eva!" you abjured. "Watch the mouth."

" M o r e drowning in self-pity!" I said. *"Oh, no, my girlfriend doesn't love me any more, I'm gonna go kill five people!"*

" W h a t about all that Armenian shit?" asked Kevin, cutting his eyes toward me flintily." *Oh, no, like, a million years ago the Turks were big meanies and now nobody cares!* That's not self-pity?"

"I'd hardly put genocide on a par with being jdted," I snapped.

" N y e h *nyeh*- nyeh nyeh N Y E H - n y e h - n y e h nyeh-nyeh *nyeh* nyeh nyehnyeh NYEE-nyeeh!" Kevin mocked under his breath.

"Jesus, give it a rest."

" — A n d what's this about wanting to kill *all the girls who'd ever broken up with him?"* I jeered.

" C o u l d you *shut upT'* said Kevin.

"Kevin!" you scolded.

"Well, I ' m *trying* to follow this, and she *said* she wanted to watch the news." Kevin often spoke of his mother as I spoke of Americans. We both preferred the third person.

"But the brat's eleven years old!" I hated people w h o talked over the news, too, but I couldn't contain myself. " H o w many girlfriends can that be?"

" O n average?" said our resident expert. " A b o u t twenty."

"Why," I said, " h o w many have *you* had?"

"Ze-ro." Kevin was n o w so slumped as to be nearly supine, and his voice had a gravelly creakiness that he would soon employ all the time. " H u m p ' e m and d u m p 'em."

" W h o a , Casanova!" you said. "This is what we get for telling a kid the facts of life at seven."

"Mommy, w h o are H u m p u m and D u m p u m ? Are they like Tweedledum and Tweedledee?"

"Celia, sweetheart," I said to our six-year-old, w h o s e sexual education did not seem so urgent. "Wouldn't you hke to go play in the playroom? We're watching the news, and it's n o t m u c h f u n for you."

"Twenty-seven bullets, sixteen hits," Kevin calculated appreciatively. "Moving targets, too.You know, for litde kids that's a decent percentage."

"No, I want to stay with you!" said Celia. "You're my friennnd!"

"But I want a picture, Celia.You haven't drawn me a picture all day!"

"Oh-kay." She lingered, fisting her skirt.

"Here, first give me a hug, then." I drew her to me, and she threw her arms about me. I wouldn't have thought a six-year-old could squeeze so hard, and it was painful to have to pry her fingers from my clothing when she wouldn't let go. Once she had shuffled out of the room, after pausing in the archway and waving with a cupped hand, I caught you rolling your eyes at Kevin.

In the meantime, a reporter on screen was interviewing Andrew Golden's grandfather, from w h o m some of the kids'

stockpile of weapons had been stolen, including three high-powered rifles, four pistols, and a trove of ammunition. "It's a terrible tragedy," he said unsteadily. "We've lost. They've lost.

Everybody's lives are ruined."

"You can say that again," I said. "I mean, what was ever going to happen but they'd be nabbed and nailed and put away for eternity? What were they thinking?"

"They weren't thinking," you said.

"You kidding?" said Kevin. "This stuff takes planning. 'Course they were thinking. Probably never thought harder in their whole crummy lives." From their first occurrence, Kevin owned these incidents, and whenever the subject arose he assumed an air of authority that got on my nerves.

"They weren't thinking about what comes next," I said. "They may have thought out their stupid attack, but not the next five minutes—much less the next fifty years."

"Wouldn't be so sure," said Kevin, reaching for a handful of nacho tortilla chips with glow-in-the-dark cheese. "You weren't

listening—as usual—cause Celie had to have her huggy-wuggies.

They're under fourteen. According to the law in Arkansas, Batman and R o b i n there'll be back in the Batmobile by eighteen."

"That's outrageous!"

"Records sealed, too. Bet everybody in Jonesboro's really lookin' forward to it."

"But you can't seriously imagine that they took a trip to the law library beforehand and checked out the statute books."

"Mm," Kevin hummed noncommittally."How do you know?

Anyway, maybe it's dumb to think about the future all the time.

Put off the present long enough and it, hke, never happens, know what I'm sayin'?"

"They have lower sentences for juveniles for good reason,"

you said. "Those kids had no idea what they were doing."

"You don't think so," said Kevin caustically. (If he was offended by my ridicule of adolescent angst, our son may have been more affronted by your compassion.)

" N o eleven-year-old has any real grasp of death," you said.

" H e doesn't have any real concept of other people—that they feel pain, even that they exist. And his own adult future isn't real to him, either. Makes it that much easier to throw it away."

"Maybe his future is real to him," said Kevin. "Maybe that's the problem."

" C o m e on, Kev," you said. "All the kids in these shootings have been middle class, not guys from some urban sewer. Those boys were looking at a life with a mortgage and a car and a j o b in management, with yearly holidays to Bah or something."

"Yeah," Kevin purred. "Like I said."

"You know what?" I said. " W h o cares. W h o cares whether shooting people is or isn't real to them, and w h o cares about their painful bust-ups with girlfriends that don't even have tits yet.

W h o cares. The problem is guns. Guns, Franklin. If guns weren't kicking around these people's houses like broom handles, none of these—"

" O h God, here we go again," you said.

"You heard J i m Lehrer say that in Arkansas it isn't even illegal for minors to possess firearms?"

" T h e y stole t h e m — "

" T h e y were there to steal. And b o t h boys owned rifles of their own. It's absurd. No guns, and those two creeps go kick a cat, or— *your* idea of h o w to solve differences—go p u n c h their ex-girlfriends in the face. Bloody nose; everybody goes home.

These shootings are so inane that I'd think you'd be grateful to find some litde turd of a lesson in them."

"Okay, I can see restricting automatic weapons," you said, getting that preachy sound that for me was the bane of parenthood.

"But guns are here to stay. They're a big part of this country, target shooting and hunting, not to mention self-defense—."You stopped because I had obviously stopped listening.

" T h e answer, if there is one, is the *parents,"* you resumed, n o w ranging the r o o m and raising your voice above the TV, from w h i c h Monica Lewinsky's big fat lovelorn face was once more ogling. "You can bet your b o t t o m dollar those boys had no one to t u r n to. No one they could really p o u r their hearts out to, w h o they could trust. W h e n you love your kids, and you're there for them, and you take them on trips, like to museums and battlefields, and make time for them, you have faith in t h e m and express an interest in what they think? *That's* w h e n this kind of plunging off the deep end doesn't happen. A n d if you don't believe me, *ask Kevin"*

B u t for once Kevin wore his derision on his sleeve. "Yeah, *Dad*\ It makes a real big difference to me that I can tell you and M u m s e y anything,

especially w h e n I ' m u n d e r all this *peer pressure* and j u n k ! You always ask w h a t *video games* I ' m playing or w h a t my *homework* is, and I always k n o w I can t u r n to you in *times of needl"*

"Yeah, well, if you couldn't turn to us, buster," you grumbled,

"you wouldn't think it was so damned funny."

Ceha had just crept back to the den's archway, where she h u n g

back, fluttering a piece of paper. I had to m o t i o n her inside. She'd always seemed undefended, but this cringing, Tiny T i m meekness of hers was new, and I hoped it was only a phase. After resealing the edges of her Opticlude bandage, I pulled her into my lap to admire her picture. It was discouraging. Dr. Sahatjian's white coat was drawn so large that his head was off the page; the self-portrait of Celia herself rose only to the oculist's knee. Although her drawings were usually light, deft, and meticulous, in the place where her left eye should have been, she's crayoned a formless scribble that violated the outline of her cheek.

Meanwhde, you were asking, "Seriously, Kev—do any of the students at your school ever seem unstable? Does anyone ever talk about guns, or play violent games or hke violent movies? Do you think something hke this could happen at your school? A n d are there at least counselors there, professionals kids can talk to if they're unhappy?"

Broadly, you probably did want answers to these questions, but their caring-Dad intensity came across as self-serving. Kevin cased you before he replied. Kids have a well-tuned radar to detect the difference between an adult who's interested and an adult who's keen to seem interested. All those times I stooped to Kevin after kindergarten and asked h i m w h a t he did that day—even as a five-year-old he could tell that I didn't care.

"All the kids at my school are unstable, Dad," he said. " T h e y play nothing but violent computer games and watch nothing but violent movies.You only go to a counselor to get out of class, and everything you tell her is a crock. Anything else?"

" I ' m sorry, Franklin," I said, lifting Ceha to sit beside me, "but I don't see h o w a few more heart-to-hearts are going to put the brakes on what is clearly becoming some kind of fad. It's spreading just hke *Teletubbies,* only instead of having to have a rubber doll with a TV in its belly, every teenager has to shoot up his school.

This year's must-have accessories: a *Star Wars* cell p h o n e and a *Lion King* semiautomatic. O h , and some accompanying sob story about being picked on, or ditched by a pretty face."

— 369 —

"Show a little empathy," you said. "These are disturbed boys.

They need help."

"They're also *imitative* boys. Think they didn't hear about Moses Lake and West Palm Beach? A b o u t Bethel, Pearl, and Paducah? Kids pick up things on TV, they listen to their parents talking. Mark my words, every well-armed temper tantrum that goes d o w n only increases the likelihood of more. This whole country's lost, everybody copies everybody else, and everybody wants to be famous. In the long term, the only hope is that these shootings get so ordinary that they're not news anymore. Ten kids get shot in some Des Moines primary school and it's reported on page six. Eventually any fad gets to be uncool, and thank G o d at some point hip thirteen-year-olds just won't want to be *seen* with a Mark-10 in second period. Until then, Kevin, I'd keep a sharp eye on any of your classmates w h o start feeling sorry for themselves in camouflage gear."

As I reconstruct this tirade of mine, I can't help but observe its implicit lesson: that if School Shootings would inevitably grow hackneyed,

ambitious adolescents with a taste for the headlines had best make their bids while the going was good.

Just over a m o n t h later in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, fourteen-year-old Andrew Wurst promised one day to make his eighth-grade graduation dance "memorable," and indeed, the next day he did.

On the patio of Nick's Place at 10 P.M., where 240 middle-schoolers were dancing to " M y Heart Will Go O n " from the film *Titanic*, Wurst shot a forty-eight-year-old teacher fatally in the head with his father's .25-caliber handgun. Inside, he fired several more shots, wounding two boys and grazing a female teacher.

Fleeing out the back, he was apprehended by the owner of Nick's Place, w h o was carrying a shotgun and convinced the fugitive to back down in the face of superior firepower. As journalists were eager to observe for a welcome note of drollery, the theme of the dance was "I've Had the T i m e of My Life."

Each of these incidents was distinguished by whatever sorry lessons could be squeezed from it.Wurst's nickname was "Satan,"

which resonated with the commotion over Luke Woodham in Pearl having been involved in a demonic cult. Wurst was a fan of an androgynous heavy-metal vocalist called Marilyn Manson, a man w h o jumped about on stage in poorly applied eyeliner, so this singer w h o was only trying to make an honest buck out of teenage bad taste was deplored in the media for a spell. Myself, I was sheepish about having been so derisive regarding the precautions taken at Kevins own eighth-grade dance the previous year. As for the shooter's motivation, it sounded amorphous. " H e hated his life," said a friend. " H e hated the world. He hated school.The only thing that would make him happy was when a girl he liked would talk to him"—exchanges that we're forced to conclude were infrequent.

Maybe School Shootings were already growing passe, because the story of eighteen-year-old Jacob Davis in Fayetteville, Tennessee, in mid-May pretty much got lost in the shuffle. Davis had already won a college scholarship and had never been in trouble. A friend remarked to reporters

later, " H e didn't hardly ever even talk. But I guess that's the ones that will get you—the quiet ones." Outside his high school three days before they were both to graduate, Davis approached another senior w h o was dating his ex-girlfriend and shot the boy thrice with a ,22-caliber rifle. It seems the breakup had hit him hard.

I may have been impatient with lovesick teen melodrama, but as killers go Davis was a gentleman. He left a note behind in his car assuring his parents and his former girlfriend how much he loved them. Once the deed was done, he put down his gun, sat down next to it, and put his head in his hands. He stayed just hke that until the police arrived, at which time the papers reported that he "surrendered without incident." This time, anomalously, I was touched. I could see it: Davis knew he had done something stupid, and he had known it was stupid beforehand. For these two facts to be concurrently true would present him with the great human puzzler for the rest of his four-walled life.

— 371 —

Meanwhile, out in Springfield, Oregon, young Kipland Kinkel had digested the lesson that wasting a single classmate was no longer a sure route to immortality. Just three days after Jacob Davis broke his beloved parents' hearts, this scrawny, weasel-faced fifteen-year-old upped the ante. Around 8 A.M. as his classmates at Thurston High finished up their breakfast, Kinkel walked calmly into the school cafeteria bearing a .22-caliber handgun, a 9-millimeter Glock, and a .22-caliber semiautomatic rifle under a trench coat. Deploying the most efficacious weapon first, he sprayed the r o o m with rifle fire, shattering windows and sending students diving for cover. Nineteen in the cafeteria were shot but survived, while four additional students were injured in the panic to get out of the building. O n e student was killed outright, a second would die in the hospital, and a third would have died as well, had Kipland s semiautomatic not run out of ammunition.

Pressed to a boy's temple, the rifle went *click, click, click.*

As Kinkel scrambled to insert a second clip, sixteen-year-old Jake R y k e r — a m e m b e r of the school wrestling team w h o ' d been shot in the chest—lunged at the killer. Kinkel pulled a pistol from his trench coat. R y k e r grabbed the gun and w r e n c h e d it away, taking another bullet in the hand. Ryker's younger brother j u m p e d on the shooter, then helped wrestle h i m to the ground.

As o t h e r students piled on top, Kinkel shouted, " S h o o t me, shoot me n o w ! " U n d e r the circumstances, I ' m rather surprised they didn't.

O h , and *by the way:* O n c e in custody, Kinkel advised the police to check his h o m e address—a lovely two-story house in an affluent subdivision lush with tall firs and rhododendrons—where they discovered a middle-aged man and w o m a n shot dead.

For at least a day or two there was m u c h evasion in the press about w h o these two people might be exacdy, until Kinkel's grandmother identified the bodies. I ' m a litde disconcerted as to just w h o the police imagined might be living in Kinkel's h o m e besides his parents.

Now, as they go, this story was rich, its moral agreeably clear.

— 372 —

Little Kipland had brisded with "warning signs" that hadn't been taken with sufficient seriousness. In middle school, he'd been voted "Most Likely to Start World War III." He had recendy given a class presentation on how to construct a bomb. In the main, he was predisposed to vent violent inclinations through the most innocuous of schoolwork. "If the assignment was to write about what you might do in a garden," said one student,

"Kipland would write about mowing down the gardeners."

Though in an eerie coincidence Kip Kinkel's initials were also

"KK," he was so universally disliked by his schoolmates that even after his performance in the cafeteria they refused to give him a nickname. Most damningly of all, the very day before the shooting he had been arrested for possession of a stolen firearm, only to be released into his parents' custody. So the word went out: Dangerous students give themselves away. They can be spotted, ergo, they can be stopped.

Kevin's school had been acting on this assumption for most of that school year, though news of every new shooting jacked up the paranoia another notch. Gladstone High had taken on a battened-down, military atmosphere, except the McCarthyite presumption ran that the enemy was within. Teachers had been provided lists of deviant behaviors to look out for, and in school assemblies students were coached to report the most casually threatening remark to the administration, even if it "seemed like" a joke. Essays were combed for an unhealthy interest in Hitler and Nazism, which made teaching courses in twentieth-century European History rather tricky. Likewise, there was a supersensitivity to the satanic, so that a senior named R o b e r t Bellamy, w h o was known by the handle "Bobby Beelzebub,"

was hauled before the principal to explain—and change—his sobriquet. An oppressive literalism reigned, so that when some excitable sophomore screamed, "I'm gonna kill you!" to a volleyball teammate w h o dropped the ball, she was slammed into the guidance counselor's office and expelled for the rest of the week. Yet there was no safe haven in the metaphoric, either.

W h e n a devout Baptist in Kevin's English class wrote in a poem,

" M y heart is a bullet, and G o d is my marksman," his teacher w e n t straight to the principal, refusing to teach her class again until the boy was transferred. Even Celia's primary school grew fatally p o -

faced: A boy in her first-grade class was kicked out for three days because he had pointed a chicken drumstick at the teacher and said, "Pow, pow, pow!"

It was the same all over the country, if the embarrassing httle squibs in *New York Times* sidebars were anything to go by.

In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, a fourteen-year-old girl was strip searched—*strip searched,* Franklin—and suspended w h e n , in a class discussion about School Shootings, she said she could see h o w kids who'd been teased might eventually snap. In Poncha-toula, Louisiana, a twelve-year-old boy was locked up in juvenile detention for an entire two weeks because his warning to his fellow fifth-graders in the cafeteria line that he'd "get t h e m " if they didn't leave him enough potatoes was construed as a "terrorist threat." On a two-page web site, Buffythevampireslayer.com, an Indiana student posited a theory that must have crossed many a high-schooler's mind from time to time that his teachers were devil worshipers; unsatisfied with his mere suspension, his teachers filed a federal lawsuit charging b o t h the boy and his mother with defamation and infliction of emotional distress. A thirteen-year-old was suspended for two weeks because on a field trip to Albuquerque's Atomic Museum, he had piped, "Are they going to teach us h o w to build a bomb?" while another boy got the third degree from a school administrator just for carrying his chemistry textbook. Nationwide, kids were expelled for wearing trench coats hke Kipland Kinkel, or just for wearing black. A n d my personal favorite was a nine-year-old's suspension after a class project about diversity and Asian culture, during which he wrote the fortune cookie message, "You will die an honorable death."

Although Kevin was ordinarily tight-lipped about goings-on at his school, he went out of his way to dehver us tidbits of this escalating hysteria. T h e reportage had the intended effect: You

were more afraid *for* him; I was more afraid q f h i m . He enjoyed the sensation of seeming dangerous, yet clearly regarded the school's precautions as farcical. " T h e y keep this up," he remarked once, and on this point he was astute, "they just gonna give kids *ideas."*

It was an evening near graduation, a falling off the edge of childhood that for seniors always has a hint of the apocalyptic, and so might have made the faculty antsy even without Kip Kinkel's help. After his usual dinner—a brutish nosh before the open refrigerator—Kevin cooled back in the den's easy chair and delivered the latest installment: T h e entire student body had just been subjected to a "lockdown" in their classrooms for four periods straight while the police searched every locker and prowled the hallways with sniffer-dogs.

" W h a t were they looking for, drugs?" I asked.

Kevin said lighdy, " O r *poems!'*

"It's this Jonesboro-Springfield nonsense," you said. " T h e y were obviously looking for guns."

" W h a t really slays me," said Kevin, stretching out and spewing his words like cigarette smoke, "—if you'll *excuse* the expression—is they sent a m e m o on the search procedure to the teachers? That loser drama teacher, Pagorski, left it on her desk, and Lenny saw it—I was impressed; didn't k n o w he could read.

Anyway, word got around. W h o l e school k n e w this was coming.

Kid with an AK in his locker had plenty of time to reconsider his piss-poor hiding place."

I asked, "Kevin, didn't any of your classmates object to this?"

"Few of the girls did, after a while," he said airily. " N o b o d y could take a leak, see. Fact," Kevin achieved a wheezy little laugh,

"that donkey-face Ulanov wet herself."

" D i d anything make the administration especially alarmed?

Or was it just, oh it's Wednesday, why don't we play with sniffer-dogs?"

"Probably an anonymous tip. T h e y r u n a telephone hodine now, so you can rat out your friends. For a quarter, I could get out of Environmental Science any day of the week."

"An anonymous tip from w h o m ? " I asked.

"Hello-o. If I told you w h o it was, then it wouldn't be anonymous, would it?"

"Well after all that bother, did they even find anything?"

"Sure they did," Kevin purled. "Shitload of overdue library books. Some old French fries that were starting to stink. O n e really juicy, evil p o e m had t h e m going for while, till it turned out to be Big Black lyrics: *This is Jordan, we do what we like...* —Oh, and one more thing. A list."

" W h a t kind of list?"

"A hit list. N o t ' M y Favorite Songs,' but the other kind.You know, w i t h T H E Y ALL DESERVE TO D I E scrawled at the top, big as life."

"Jesus!" You sat up. "These days, that's not funny."

" N o o o o , they didn't think it was funny."

"I h o p e they're planning to give this kid a good talking-to,"

you said.

" O o o h , I think they'll do better than a *talking-to."*

"Well, w h o was it?" I asked. " W h e r e did they find it?"

"In his locker. Funniest thing, too. Last guy you'd expect.

Superspic."

"Kev," you said sharply. "I've warned you about that kind of language."

"'Scuse me. I mean *Senor Espinoza.* Guess he's just bustin'

with *ethnic hostility* and *pent-up resentment* on behalf of *the Latino people."*

" H o l d on," I said. "Didn't he win some big academic prize last year?"

"Can't say as I recall," said Kevin blithely."But that three-week suspension is going to nasty up his record something terrible.

Ain't that a shame? Geez, and you think you k n o w people."

"If everyone k n e w this search was coming," I said, " w h y wouldn't this Espinoza boy clear such an incriminating list from his locker beforehand?"

"Dunno," said Kevin. "Guess he's an amateur."

I d r u m m e d my fingers on the coffee table. "These lockers.

T h e kind I grew up with had slits in the top. Aeration vents. Do yours?"

"Sure," he said, heading from the room. "So the French fries keep better."

T h e y suspended the valedictorian-in-waiting; they made Greer Ulanov pee her pants. They punished the poets, the hotheaded sportsmen, the morbidly dressed. Anyone with a jazzy nickname, an extravagant imagination, or the less than lavish social portfolio that might mark a student as an "outcast" became suspect. As far as I could tell, it was War on Weirdos.

But I identified with weirdos. In my o w n adolescence, I had strong, stormy Armenian features and so wasn't considered pretty. I had a funny name. My brother was a quiet, dour n o b o d y w h o ' d scored me no social points as

a predecessor. I had a shut-in mother w h o would never drive me anywhere or attend school functions, if her insistence on continuing to manufacture excuses was rather sweet; and I was a dreamer w h o fantasized endlessly about escape, not only from Racine but the entire United States.

Dreamers don't watch their backs. Were I a student at Gladstone High in 1998, I'd surely have written some shocking fantasy in sophomore English about putting my forlorn famdy out of its misery by blowing the sarcophagus of 137 Enderby Avenue to kingdom come, or in a civics project on "diversity" the gruesome detad in which I recounted the Armenian genocide would betray an *unhealthy* fascination with violence. Alternatively, I'd express an inadvisable sympathy with poor Jacob Davis sitting beside his gun with his head in his hands, or I'd tactlessly decry a Latin test as *murderous*—one way or another, I'd be out on my ear.

Kevin, though. Kevin wasn't weird. N o t so's you notice. He did brandish the tiny-clothes thing, but he didn't wear all black, and he didn't skulk in a trench coat; "tiny clothes" were not on the official photocopied list of "warning signs." His grades were straight Bs, and no one seemed to find this astonishing but me.

I thought, this is a bright kid, grade inflation is rife, you'd think

he'd make an A by *accident.* But no, Kevin applied his intelligence to keeping his head below the parapet. I think he overdid it, too.

T h a t is, his essays were so boring, so lifeless, and so m o n o t o n o u s as to border on deranged. You'd think someone would have noticed that those choppy, stultifying sentences ("Paul Revere rode a horse. He said that the British were coming. He said, ' T h e British are c o m i n g . T h e British are coming.'") were sticking two fingers up his teacher's butt. But it was only w h e n he wrote a paper contrived to repeatedly use the words *snigger, niggardly,* and *Nigeria* for his Black History teacher that he pushed his luck.

Socially, Kevin camouflaged himself with just enough

"friends" so as not to appear, alarmingly, a loner. They were all mediocrities —exceptional mediocrities, if there is such a thing—or outright cretins like Lenny Pugh. They all pursued this minimalist approach to education, and they didn't get into trouble. T h e y may well have led a whole secret life behind this gray scrim of bovine obedience, but the one thing that didn't raise a red flag at his high school was being suspiciously drab. T h e mask was perfect.

D i d Kevin take drugs? I've never been sure. You agonized enough about h o w to approach the subject, whether to pursue the rectitudinous course and denounce all pharmaceuticals as the sure route to insanity and the gutter or to play the reformed hellraiser and vaunt a long list of substances that you once devoured like candy until you learned the hard way that they could rot your teeth. (The truth—that we hadn't cleaned out the medicine cabinet, but we'd both tried a variety of recreational drugs, and not only in the sixties but up to a year before he was born; that better living through chemistry had driven neither of us to an asylum or even to an emergency room; and that these gleeful carnival rides on the mental midway were far more the source of nostalgia than remorse—was *unacceptable.)* Each path had pitfalls.

T h e former doomed you as a fuddy-duddy who'd no notion what he was talking about; the latter reeked of hypocrisy. I recall you finally charted some middle way and admitted to smoking dope, told him for the sake of consistency that it was okay if he wanted to "try it," but to not get caught, and to please, please not tell anyone that you'd been anything but condemnatory about narcotics of any kind. Me, I bit my hp. Privately I beheved that downing a few capsules of ecstasy could be the best thing that ever happened to that boy.

As for sex, the accuracy of that " h u m p 'em and dump ' e m "

boast is up for grabs. If I've claimed, of us two, to " k n o w " Kevin the better, that is only to say that I know him for being opaque.

I k n o w that I don't know him. It's possible he's still a virgin; I'm only sure of one thing. That is, if he has had sex, it's been grim—short, pumping; shirt

on. (For that matter, he could have been sodomizing Lenny Pugh. It's uncannily easy to picture.) Hence Kevin may even have heeded your stern caution that if he ever felt ready for sex he should always use a condom, if only because a slimy rubber sheath bulging with milky come would have made his vacuous encounters that much more delectably sordid. I reason that nothing about a blindness to beauty necessitates a blindness to ugliness, for which Kevin long ago developed a taste. Presumably there are as many fine shades of the gross as the gorgeous, so that a mind full of blight wouldn't preclude a certain refinement.

There was one more matter at the end of Kevin's ninth-grade school year that I never bothered you about, but I'll mention it in passing for the sake of being thorough.

I'm sure you would remember that in early June, AWAP's computers were contaminated with a computer virus. Our technical staff traced it to an e-mail tided, cleverly, "WAPJSfING: Deadly new virus in circulation." No one seemed to trouble with hard-copy dumps or those chintzy little floppies anymore, so that since the virus also infected our backup drive, the results were disastrous.

With fde after file, access was denied, it didn't exist, or it came up on screen all squares, squiggles, and tildes. Four different editions were put back for at least six months, encouraging scores of our most devoted bookstores, including the chains, to put in bountiful orders for *The Rough Guide* and *The Lonely Planet* w h e n *A Wing and a Prayer* couldn't satisfy the brisk summer market with u p - t o -

date hstings. (We didn't make any friends, either, w h e n the virus sent itself to every e-mail address on our marketing list.) We never fully recouped the trade we lost that season, so the fact that I was forced to sell the company in 2000 for less than half its valuation two years earlier traces in some measure to this contagion. For me, it substantially contributed to 1998's Zeitgeist of siege.

I did not tell you about its source out of shame. I should never have been snooping, you'd say. I should have minded every parenting manual's edict to respect the inviolability of a child's bedroom. If I suffered dire

consequences, I had made my o w n bed. It's the oldest switcheroo in the book, and a favorite of the faithless the world over: W h e n folks discover something incriminating by poking around where they're not supposed to, you immediately flip the issue to the snooping itself, to distract from what they found.

I'm n o t sure what led me to go in there. I'd stayed h o m e from AWAP to take Ceha in for another oculist appointment, to check on her adaptation to the prosthesis. There was little enough in Kevin's r o o m to attract curiosity, though it may have been this very quality—its mysterious blankness—that I found so magnetic. W h e n I creaked open the door I felt powerfully that I wasn't meant to be there. Kevin was in school, you were scouting, Celia was poring over h o m e w o r k that should have taken her ten minutes and would therefore take her a good two hours, so the chances of my being discovered were slim. Still, my heart raced and my breath was bated. This is silly, I told myself. I ' m in my own house, and if improbably interrupted I can claim to be checking for dirty dishes.

Fat chance, in that room. It was immaculate; you teased Kevin about being a "granny," he was such a neatnik. T h e bed was made with boot-camp precision. We'd offered him a bedspread of racing cars or Dungeons and Dragons; he'd been quite firm on

preferring plain beige. T h e walls were unadorned; no posters of Oasis or the Spice Girls, no leering Marilyn M a n s o n . T h e shelves lay largely bare: a few textbooks, a single copy of *Robin Hood*; the many books we gave him for Christmas and birthdays simply disappeared. He had his o w n TV and stereo system, but about the only "music" I'd heard him play was some kind of Philip Glass-like CD that sequenced computer-generated phrases according to a set mathematical equation; it had no form, no peaks or valleys, and approximated the white noise that he would also tune in on the television w h e n he was not watching the Weather Channel. Again, the C D s we'd given him w h e n trying to sort out what he "liked" were nowhere in evidence. T h o u g h you could get delightful screen savers of

leaping dolphins or zooming space-ships, the one on his Gateway merely pointillated random dots.

Was this what it looked hke inside his head? Or was the room, too, a kind of screen saver? Just add a seascape above the bed, and it looked like an unoccupied unit at a Quality Inn. N o t a photograph at his bedside, nor keepsake on his bureau—the surfaces were slick and absent. H o w m u c h I'd have preferred to walk into a hellhole jangling with heavy-metal, lurid with *Playboy* centerfolds, fetid from muddy sweats, and crusty with year-old tuna sandwiches. That was the kind of n o - g o teen lair that I understood, where I might discover safe, accessible secrets hke a w o r n Durex packet under the socks or a baggie of cannabis stuffed in the toe of a smelly sneaker. By contrast, the secrets of this r o o m were all about what I would not find, like some trace of my son. Looking around, I thought uneasily, *He could be anyone.*

But as for its conceit that there was nothing to hide, I wasn't buying. So w h e n I spotted a stack of floppies on the shelf above the computer, I shuttled through them. Inscribed with characterless perfect printing, their titles were obscure:"Nostradamus,""I Love You,""D4-X." Feeling wicked, I picked one of t h e m out, p u t the rest back the way I found them, and shpped out the door.

In my study, I inserted the floppy in my computer. I didn't recognize the suffixes on the A drive, but they weren't regular word-processing files, which disappointed me. In hoping to find a private journal or diary, I may have been less eager to discover the precise content of his inmost thoughts than to confirm that at least he *had* inmost thoughts. N o t about to give up easily, I went into the Explorer program and loaded one of the files; perplexingly, Microsoft Outlook Express came up on screen, at which point Celia called from the dining table that she needed help. I was gone for about fifteen minutes.

W h e n I returned, the computer was blank. It had shut itself off, which it had never done without being told. Disconcerted, I turned it on again but got nothing but error messages, even when I took the disk from the drive.

You're way ahead of me. I carted the thing into work the next day so that my technical people might sort it out, only to discover the entire office milling about. It wasn't exacdy pandemonium, more hke the atmosphere of a party that had run out of drink.

Editors were chatting aimlessly in one another's cubicles. No one was working. They couldn't. There wasn't a terminal functioning.

Later I was almost relieved when George informed me that my PC's hard drive was so corrupted that I might as well buy a new one. Perhaps with the infectious object destroyed, no one would ever know that the virus had been forwarded by AWAP's own executive director.

Furious at Kevin for keeping the modern equivalent of a pet scorpion, I held onto the disk as evidence for several days rather than discreedy sliding it back on his shelf. But once I simmered down, I had to admit that Kevin hadn't personally wiped out my company's files, and the debacle was my fault. So one evening I knocked on his door, was granted admission, and closed it behind me. He was sitting at the desk.The screen saver was bhpping in its desultory fashion, dot here, dot there.

"I wanted to ask you," I said, tapping his floppy. "What's this?"

"A virus," he said brightly. "You didn't load it in, did you?"

" O f course not," I said hastily, discovering that lying to a child feels much the same as lying to a parent; my cheeks prickled as

they had w h e n I assured my mother after losing my cherry at seventeen that I'd spent the night with a girlfriend she'd never heard of. M o t h e r k n e w better; Kevin did, too. "I mean," I revised mournfully, "only once."

" O n l y takes once."

We b o t h k n e w that it would have been ridiculous for me to have sneaked into his r o o m and stolen a disk, with which I subsequently ruined my computer and paralyzed my office, only to come storming in to accuse him of industrial sabotage. So the interchange proceeded with an evenness.

" W h y do you have it?" I asked respectfully.

"I keep a collection."

"Isn't that a peculiar thing to collect?"

"I don't hke stamps."

Just then I had a presentiment of w h a t he might have said had you burst in determined to find out *why the heck* he had a stack of c o m p u t e r viruses above his desk: *Well, after we watched* Silence of the Lambs, *I decided I wanted to be an FBI agent! And you know how they have this whole task-force that, like, tracks down hackers who spread those terrible computer viruses? So I'm studying them and everything, 'cause I've read it's a really big problem for the new economy and globalization and even for our country's defense...!* T h a t Kevin skipped such a p e r f o r m a n c e — h e collected c o m p u t e r viruses, end of story, so what?—left me feeling strangely flattered.

So I asked bashfully. " H o w many do you have?"

"Twenty-three."

"Are they—difficult to find?"

He looked at me gamely, with that old sense of indecision, but on some w h i m he decided to experiment with talking to his mother. "They're hard to *capture alive,"* he said. " T h e y get away, and they bite.You have to k n o w h o w to handle them.You know—like a doctor. W h o studies diseases in a lab but doesn't want to get sick himself."

"You mean, you have to keep them from infecting your o w n machine."

"Yeah. Mouse Ferguson's been teaching me the ropes."

"Since you collect them. Maybe you can explain to m e — w h y do people make them? I don't get it.They don't achieve anything.

What's the appeal?"

"I don't get," he said, "what you don't get."

"I understand hacking into A T & T to get free p h o n e calls or stealing encrypted credit card numbers to run up a bill at T h e Gap. But this sort of computer c r i m e — n o b o d y benefits. What's the point?"

" T h a t is the point."

" I ' m still lost," I said.

"Viruses—they're kind of elegant, you know? Almost—pure.

Kind of like—charity work, you know? It's *selfless."*

"But it's not that different from creating AIDS."

"Maybe somebody did," he said affably. "'Cause otherwise?

You type on your computer and go h o m e and the refrigerator comes on and another computer spits out your paycheck and you sleep and you enter more shit on your computer.. .Might as well be dead."

"So it's this-—. Almost to, what, k n o w you're alive. To show other people they don't control you. To prove you can do something, even if it could get you arrested."

"Yeah, pretty much," he said appreciatively. In his eyes, I had exceeded myself.

"Ah," I said, and handed him his disk back. "Well, thanks for explaining."

As I turned to go, he said, "Your computer's fucked, isn't it."

"Yes, it's fucked," I said ruefully. "I guess I deserved it."

"You know, if there's anybody you don't hke?" he offered.

"And you got their e-mail address? Just l e m m e know."

I laughed. "Okay, I'll be sure to do that. T h o u g h , some days?

T h e people I don't like come to quite a list."

"Better warn t h e m you got friends in low places," he said.

So this is *bonding]* I marveled, and closed the door.

' 4

— 384

M A R C H 1 6 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

Well, it's another Friday night on which I gird myself for a visit to Chatham tomorrow morning. T h e halogen bulbs are trembling again, dickering hke my stoic resolve to be a g o o d soldier and live out what's left of my life for the sake of some unnamable duty. I've sat here for over an hour, w o n d e r i n g what keeps me going, and more specifically just what it is I want from you. I guess it goes without saying that I want you back; the volume of this correspondence—though it's more of a *respondence,* isn't it?—attests heavdy to that. But what else? Do I want you to forgive me? A n d if so, for what exactly?

After all, I was uneasy with the unsolicited tide of forgiveness that washed over the shipwreck of our famdy in the wake of *Thursday.* In addition to mail promising either to beat his brains out or to bear his babies, Kevin has

received dozens of letters offering to share his pain, apologizing for society's having faded to recognize his spiritual distress and granting him blanket moral amnesty for what he has yet to regret. Amused, he's read choice selections aloud to me in the visiting room.

Surely it makes a travesty of the exercise to forgive the unrepentant, and I speak for myself as well. I, too, have received a torrent of mad (my e-mad and postal address were billboarded on both partnersnprayer.org and beliefhet.com without my consent; apparently at any one time, thousands of Americans have been

praying for my salvation), m u c h of it invoking a G o d in w h o m I was less disposed to believe than ever, while sweepingly acquitting my shortcomings as a mother. I can only assume that these well-meaning people felt moved by my plight.Yet it bothered me that nearly all this deliverance was bestowed by strangers, which made it seem cheap, and an undercurrent of preening betrayed that conspicuous clemency has become the religious version of driving a flashy car. By contrast, my brother Giles's staunch incapacity to pardon us for the unwelcome attentions that our wayward son has visited u p o n his own family is a grudge I treasure, if only for its frankness. Thus I was of half a mind to mark the envelopes

" R e t u r n to sender," hke Pocket Fishermans and Gensu knives I hadn't ordered. In the early months, still asthmatic with grief, I was more in the m o o d for the bracing open air of the pariah than for the close, stifling confines of Christian charity. And the vengefulness of my hate mail was meat-red and raw, whereas the kindness of condolences was pastel and processed, hke commercial baby food; after reading a few pages from the merciful, I'd feel as if I'd just crawled from a vat of liquefied squash. I wanted to shake these people and scream, *Forgive us! Do you know what he did?*

But in retrospect it may grate on me most that this big d u m b absolution latterly in vogue is doled out so selectively.

Weak characters of an everyday sort—bigots, sexists, and panty fetishists—need not apply. " K K " the murderer harvests sheaves of pitying p e n pals; an addled drama teacher too desperate to be liked is blackballed for the rest of her life. From which you may correctly construe that I ' m not so bothered by the caprices of all America's compassion as I am by yours.You bent over backward to be understanding about killers like Luke W o o d h a m in Pearl and httle Mitchell and Andrew in Jonesboro. So why had you no sympathy to spare forVicki Pagorski?

T h e first semester of Kevin's sophomore year in 1998 was dominated by that scandal. R u m o r s had circulated for weeks, b u t we weren't in the loop, so the first we heard about it was

w h e n the administration sent that letter around to all Ms.

Pagorski's drama students. I'd been surprised that Kevin elected to take a drama course. He tended to shy f r o m the limelight in those days, lest scrutiny blow his Regular Kid cover. On the other hand, as his r o o m suggested, *he could be anybody,* so he may have b e e n interested in acting for years.

"Franklin, you should take a l o o k at this," I said one N o v e m b e r evening while you were grumbling over the *Times* that Clinton was a "lying sack of shit." I handed you the letter.

"I don't k n o w w h a t to make of it."

As you adjusted your reading glasses, I had one of those j u d d e r i n g update m o m e n t s w h e n I realized that your hair had n o w passed decisively from blond to gray. "Seems to me," you determined, "this lady's got a taste for tenderloin."

"Well, you have to infer that," I said. " B u t if someone's made an accusation, this letter's n o t defending her. *If your son or daughter has*

reported anything irregular or inappropriate...Please speak to your child...They're digging for m o r e dirt!"

" T h e y have to protect themselves. — K E V ! C o m e into the den for a sec!" Kevin sauntered across the dining area in tiny dove-gray sweats, their elastic ankles b u n c h e d under his knees.

"Kev, this is a little awkward," you said, "and you haven't d o n e anything wrong. N o t a thing. B u t this drama teacher, Ms.—Pagorski. Do you like her?"

Kevin slumped against the archway. "Okay, I guess. She's a little..."

"A little what?"

Kevin looked elaborately in all directions. "Hinky."

" H i n k y h o w ? " I asked.

He studied his unlaced sneakers, glancing up through his eyelashes. "She hke, wears f u n n y clothes and stuff. N o t like a teacher. Tight jeans, and sometimes her b l o u s e — " He twisted, and scratched an ankle w i t h his foot. "Like, the buttons at the top, they're n o t . . .See, she gets all excited w h e n she's directing a scene, and t h e n . . . It's sort of embarrassing."

" D o e s she wear a bra?" you asked bluntly.

Kevin averted his face, suppressing a grin. " N o t always."

"So she dresses casually, and sometimes—provocatively," 1

said. "Anything else?"

"Well, it's not a big deal or anything, but she does use a lot of dirty words, you know? Like, it's okay, b u t f r o m a teacher and everything, well, hke I

said, it's hinky."

"Dirty like *damn* and *hell?"* you prodded. " O r harder core?"

Kevin raised his shoulders helplessly. "Yeah, like—sorry, M u m s e y — "

" O h , skip it, Kevin," I said impatiently; his discomfiture seemed rather overdone. " I ' m a grown-up."

"Like *fuck,"* he said, meeting my eyes. "She says, hke, *That was a fucking good performance,* or she'll direct some guy, *Look at her like you really want to fuck her, like you want to fuck her till she squeals like a pig!'*

"Little out there, Eva," you said, eyebrows raised.

" W h a t does she look like?" I said.

"She's got big, uh," he m i m e d honeydews, "and a really wide," this time he couldn't contain the grin, "hke, a huge butt.

She's old and everything. Sort of a hag, basically."

"Is she a g o o d teacher?" I said.

"She's sure into it anyway."

" I n t o it how?" you said.

"She's always trying to get us to stay after school and practice o u r scenes with her. Most teachers just want to go home, you know? N o t Pagorski. She can't get enough."

" S o m e teachers," I said sharply, "are very passionate about their work."

"That's w h a t she is," said Kevin. " R e a l , real *passionate."*

"Sounds like she's a little bohemian," you said, " o r a bit of a loon.That's all right. But other things aren't all right. So we need to know. Has she ever

touched you. In a flirtatious way. O r —below the waist. In any way that made you uncomfortable."

T h e squirming became extravagant, and he scratched his bare

midriff as if it didn't really itch. "Depends on what you mean by *uncomfortable,* I guess."

You looked alarmed. "Son, it's just us here. But this is a big deal, all right? We have to k n o w if anything—happened."

"Look," he said bashfully. " N o offense, Mumsey, but would you mind? I'd rather talk to Dad in private."

Frankly, I minded very much. If I was going to be asked to trust this story, I wanted to hear it myself. But there was nothing for it but to excuse myself to the kitchen and fret.

Fifteen minutes later, you were steamed. I poured you a glass of wine, but you couldn't sit down. "Tell you what, Eva, this w o m a n went beyond the pale," you m u r m u r e d urgendy, and gave me the lowdown.

"Are you going to report this?"

"Bet your life I ' m going to report this.That teacher should be fired. Hell, she should be arrested. He's underage."

" D o y o u — d o you want to go in together?" I'd been about to ask instead, *Do you believe him?* but I didn't bother.

I left turning state's evidence to you, w h d e I volunteered to meet Dana Rocco, Kevin's Enghsh teacher, for a routine parent-teacher conference.

Whisking out of Ms. Rocco's classroom at 4 P.M., Mary Woolford passed me in the hallway with barely a nod; her daughter was no academic bright

spark, and she looked, if this was not merely a permanent condition, put out. W h e n I entered, Ms.

R o c c o had that having-just-taken-a-deep-breath expression, as if drawing on inner resources. But she recovered readily enough, and her handclasp was warm.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you," she said, firm rather than gushy. "Your son's quite an enigma to me, and I've been hoping you could help me crack the code."

" I ' m afraid I rely on his teachers to explain the mystery to *me,"* I said with a wan smde, assuming the hot seat by her desk.

" T h o u g h I doubt they've been enlightening."

"Kevin turns in his homework. He isn't a truant. He doesn't, as far as anyone knows, take knives to school. That's all his teachers have ever cared to know."

" I ' m afraid that most teachers here have nearly 100

students—"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be critical.You're spread so thin that I'm impressed you've even learned his name."

" O h , I noticed Kevin right away—." She seemed about to say more, and stopped. She placed a pencil eraser on her bottom hp. A slim, attractive woman in her mid-forties, she had decisive features that tended to set in an implacable expression, her m o u t h faintly pressed. Yet if she exuded an air of restraint, her reserve did not seem natural but learned, perhaps by expensive trial and error.

It wasn't an easy time to be a schoolteacher, if it ever had been. Squeezed by the state for higher standards and by parents for higher grades, under the magnifying glass for any ethnic insensitivity or sexual impropriety, torn by the rote demands of proliferating standardized tests and student cries for creative expression, teachers were both blamed for everything that went wrong with kids and turned to for their every salvation. This dual role of scapegoat and savior was downright messianic, but even in 1998 shekels Jesus was probably paid better.

"What's his game?" Ms. R o c c o resumed, bouncing the eraser on her desk.

"Pardon?"

"What do you think that boy's up to? He tries to hide it, but he's smart. Quite the savage social satirist, too. Has he always done these tongue-in-cheek papers, or are these deadpan parodies something new?"

"He's had a keen sense of the absurd since he was a toddler."

"Those three-letter-word essays are tours de force. Tell me, is there anything he doesn't find ridiculous?"

"Archery," I said miserably. "I have no idea why he doesn't get tired of it."

" W h a t do you think he likes about it?"

I frowned. "Something about that arrow—the focus—its purposiveness, or sense of direction. Maybe he envies it. There's a ferocity about Kevin at target practice. Otherwise, he can seem rather aimless."

"Ms. Khatchadourian, I don't want to put you on the spot.

But has anything happened in your family that I should k n o w about? I was hoping you could help explain why your son seems so *angry"*

"That's odd. Most of his teachers have described Kevin as placid, even lethargic."

"It's a front," she said confidently.

"I do think of him as a litde rebellious—"

" A n d he rebels by doing everything he's supposed to. It's very clever. B u t I look in his eyes, and he's raging. W h y ? "

"Well, he wasn't too happy w h e n his sister was b o r n . . . B u t that was over seven years ago, and he wasn't t o o happy before she was b o r n , either." My dehvery had g r o w n morose. "We're pretty well o f f — y o u know, we have a big h o u s e . . . " I introduced an air of embarrassment. "We try n o t to spoil him, but he lacks for nothing. Kevin's father adores him, almost— too m u c h . His sister did have an—accident last winter in w h i c h Kevin was—involved, but he didn't seem very bothered by it. N o t bothered enough, in fact. Otherwise, I can't tell you any terrible trauma he's b e e n through or deprivation he's suffered.We lead the g o o d life, don't we?"

"Maybe that's what he's angry about."

" W h y would affluence make him mad?"

"Maybe he's mad that this is as good as it gets.Your big house.

His good school. I think it's very difficult for kids these days, in a way. T h e country's very prosperity has b e c o m e a burden, a dead end. Everything works, doesn't it? At least if you're white and middle class. So it must often seem to young people that they're not needed. In a sense, it's as if there's nothing more to do."

"Except tear it apart."

"Yes. A n d you see the same cycles in history. It's not only children."

"You know, I've tried to tell my kids about the hardships of hfe in countries like Bangladesh or Sierra Leone. But it's not their hardship, and I can't exactly tuck t h e m in on a bed of nails every night so they'll appreciate the miracle of comfort."

"You said your husband 'adores' Kevin. H o w do you get along with him?"

I folded my arms. "He's a teenager."

Wisely, she dropped the subject. "Your son is anything but a hopeless case.That's what I most wanted to tell you. He's sharp as a tack. Some of his papers—did you read the one on the SUV?

It was worthy of Swift. And I've noticed that he asks challenging questions merely to catch me o u t — t o humiliate me in front of the class. In fact, he knows the answer beforehand. So I've been playing along. I call on him, and he asks w h a t *logomachy* means. I gladly admit I don't know, and bingo, he's learned a new w o r d —because he had to find it in the dictionary to ask the question.

It's a game we play. He spurns learning through regular channels.

But if you get at him through the back door, your young man has spark."

I was jealous. "Generally w h e n I knock at the door, it's locked."

"Please don't despair. I assume that with you, just as in school, he's inaccessible and sarcastic. As you said, he's a teenager. But he's also inhaling information at a ferocious rate, if only because he's determined that n o b o d y get the better of him."

I glanced at my watch; I'd r u n overtime. "These high school massacres," I said offhandedly, collecting my purse."Do you w o r r y that something hke that could happen here?"

" O f course it could happen here. A m o n g a big enough group of people, of any age, somebody's going to have a screw loose. But honestly, my

turning violent poetry into the office only makes my students mad. In fact, it should make t h e m mad. Madder, even.

So many kids take all this censorship, these locker searches—"

"Flagrantly illegal," I noted.

"—Flagrandy illegal searches." She nodded. "Well, so many of t h e m take it lying d o w n hke sheep. They're told it's for 'their own protection,' and for the most part they just—buy it. W h e n I was their age we'd have staged sit-ins and marched around with placards—." She stopped herself again. "I think it's good for t h e m to get their hostihties out on paper. It's harmless, and a release valve. But that's b e c o m e a minority view. At least these horrible incidents are still very rare. I wouldn't lose any sleep over it."

"And, uh—," I stood, "the rumors aboutVicki Pagorski.Think there's anything to them?"

Ms. Rocco's eyes clouded. "I don't think that's been established."

"I mean, off the record. Is it credible. Assuming you k n o w her."

"Vicki is a friend of mine, so I don't feel impartial—." She once more put that eraser on her chin. "This has been a painful time for her." That was all she would say.

Ms. R o c c o saw me to the door. "I want you to give Kevin a message for me," she said with a smde. "You tell h i m I ' m *onto him!'*

I'd often nursed the same conviction, but I'd never have asserted it in such a cheerful tone of voice.

Anxious to avert legal action, the Nyack School Board held a closed disciplinary hearing at Gladstone High, to w h i c h only the parents of four of Vicki Pagorski's students were invited.

Trying to keep the event casual, they p u t the meeting in a regular classroom. Still the r o o m sizzled w i t h a sense of occasion, and the other three mothers had dressed up. (I realized I'd made terribly classist assumptions about Lenny Pugh's parents, w h o m we'd never met, w h e n I f o u n d myself scanning for overweight trailer-park trash in loud polyester to no avail. I later discerned that he was the banker-type in chalk-stripe, she the stunning, intelligent-looking redhead in understated gear that was clearly

designer label, because it didn't show any buttons. So we all have our crosses to bear.) T h e school board and that beefy principal, Donald Bevons, had assumed a set of folding chairs along one wall, and they were all scowling with rectitude, while we parents were stuck in those infantilizing school desks. Four other folding chairs were arranged on one side of the teacher's desk at the front, where there sat two nervous-looking boys I didn't know, along with Kevin and Lenny Pugh, w h o kept leaning over toward Kevin and whispering behind his hand.

On the other side of the desk was seated, I could only assume, Vicki Pagorski.

So much for the powers of adolescent description. She was hardly a hag; I doubt she was even thirty. I would never have depicted her breasts as large or her keister as wide, for she had the agreeably solid figure of a woman w h o ate her Wheaties.

Attractive? Hard to say. With that snub nose and freckles, she had a lost, girlish, innocent look that some m e n like. T h e drab dun suit was doubtless donned for the event; her friend Dana R o c c o would have counseled against tight jeans and a low-cut shirt. But it's too bad she hadn't done anything about her hair, which was thick and kinky; it frizzed from her head in all directions and suggested a ditzy, frazzled state of mind. T h e glasses, too, were unfortunate: The round oversized frames gave her a pop-eyed appearance, inducing the impression of dumb shock. Hands twisting in

her lap, knees locked tightly together under the straight wool skirt, she reminded me a bit of let-us-call-her-Alice at that eighth-grade dance immediately after Kevin whispered I-didn't-want-to-know.

W h e n the chairman of the school board, Alan Strickland, called the little group to order, the room was already unpleasantly quiet. Strickland said that they hoped to clear up these allegations one way or the other without landing this business in court. He talked about how seriously the board took this sort of thing and blathered on about teaching and trust. He emphasized that he didn't want anything we said that evening leaving this room until the board decided what action to take, if any; the stenographer was taking notes for internal purposes only. Belying the rhetoric of informal chitchat, he explained that Miss Pagorski had declined to ask her attorney to be present. A n d then he asked Kevin to have a seat in the chair placed in front of the teacher's desk and to just tell us in his o w n words what happened that afternoon in O c t o b e r in Miss Pagorski's classroom.

Kevin, too, recognized the importance of costuming, and for once was wearing plain slacks and a b u t t o n - d o w n of the customary size. On command, he assumed the shuffling, averted-eye squirm that he'd practiced in the archway of our den. "You mean, like, that time she asked me to stay after school, right?"

"I never asked him to stay after school," Pagorski blurted. H e r voice was shaky but surprisingly forceful.

"You'll get your chance, Miss Pagorski," said Strickland. "For n o w we're going to hear Kevin's side of things, all right?" He clearly wanted this hearing to proceed calmly and civilly, and I thought, *good luck.*

"I don't know," said Kevin, ducking and weaving his head. "It just got kinda *intimate,* you know? I wasn't gonna say anything or anything, but then my dad started asking questions and I like, told him."

"Told him about what?" Strickland asked gendy.

"You k n o w — w h a t I told Mr. Bevons about, too, before."

Kevin sandwiched his hands between his thighs and looked at the floor.

"Kevin, I realize this is difficult for you, but we're going to need details.Your teacher's career is on the line."

Kevin looked to you. "Dad, do I have to?"

"Afraid so, Kev," you said.

"Well, Miss Pagorski's always been nice to me, Mr. Strickland.

Real nice. Always asking did I need help choosing a scene or could she read the other part so I could m e m o r i z e m i n e . . . A n d I've never t h o u g h t I was all that good, b u t she'd say I was a great actor and she loved my 'dramatic face' and my 'tight build' and with my looks I could be in the movies. I don't k n o w about that. Still, I sure wouldn't want to get her in trouble."

"You leave that to us, Kevin, and just tell us what happened."

"See, she'd asked me several times if I could stay after school so she could coach me on my delivery, but before I'd always said I couldn't. Actually, I could, most days, I mean, I didn't have anything I had to do or anything, but I just didn't—I felt f u n n y about it. I don't k n o w why, it just felt kinda weird w h e n she'd pull me over to her desk after class and, like, pick off little pieces of hnt on my shirt that I wasn't sure were really there. Or she'd take the flap of my belt and tuck it back in the loop?"

"Since w h e n has Kevin ever w o r n a *belt?"* I whispered. You shushed me quiet.

" — B u t this one time she was real insistent, almost hke I had to, like it was part of class work or something. I didn't want to go—I told you, I don't k n o w why exactly, I just didn't—-but it seemed hke this time I didn't have any choice."

Most of this was addressed to the linoleum, but Kevin would shoot quick glances at Strickland from time to time, and Strickland would n o d

reassuringly.

"So I waited around till 4 o'clock, since she said she had stuff to do right after the bell, and by then there wasn't hardly anybody around anymore. I walked into her classroom, and I thought it was kinda strange that she'd changed clothes since our f o u r t h -

period class. I mean, just the shirt, but n o w it was one of those stretchy T s that are scooped low and it was clingy enough I could see her—you know."

" H e r what?"

" H e r . . .nipples," said Kevin. "So I said,'You want me to go though my monologue?' and she got up and closed the door. A n d she locked it. She said, "We need a little privacy, don't we?" I said, actually, I didn't mind the air. T h e n I asked should I start at the top, and she said,'First we've got to work on that posture of yours.'

She said I've got to learn to speak from the diaphragm, right *here,* and she put her hand on my chest and she left it there. T h e n she

said, and you've got to stand up real straight, and she put her other hand on my lower back and pressed and sort of smoothed around. I sure did stand up straight. I remember holding my breath, hke. Since I was nervous. T h e n I started my monologue from *Equus*—actually, I'd wanted to do Shakespeare, you know?

That *to be or not to be* thing. I thought it was kinda cool."

"In your own good time, son. But what happened next?"

"I think she interrupted me after only two or three lines. She said, 'You have to remember that this play is all about *sex!* She said, ' W h e n he blinds those horses, it's an *erotic act!* A n d then she started asking if I've ever seen horses, big horses up close, not the hke, geldings, but stallions, and had I

ever noticed what a big— I ' m sorry, do you want me to say what she really said, or should I just, you know, summarize?"

"It would be better if you used her exact words, as well as you can remember."

"Okay, you asked for it." Kevin inhaled."She wanted to k n o w if I'd ever seen a horse's *cock.* H o w big it was. And all this time I ' m feeling kinda— funny. Like, resdess. And she put her hand on my, uh. Fly. Of my jeans. And I was pretty embarrassed, because with all that talk, I'd got.. .a little worked up."

"You mean you had an erection," said Strickland sternly.

"Look, do I have to go on?" Kevin appealed.

"If you can, it would be better if you finished the story."

Kevin glanced at the ceiling and crossed his legs tightly, tapping the toe of his right sneaker in an agitated, irregular rhythm against the toe of the left. "So I said, 'Miss Pagorski maybe we should work on this scene some other time, 'cause I've got to go soon.'

I wasn't sure whether to say anything about her hand, so I just kept saying that maybe we should *stop,* that I wanted to *stop,* that I should *go* now. 'Cause it didn't seem right, and, you know, I like her, but not like *that.* She could be my m o t h e r or something."

"Let's be clear here," said Strickland. "Legally, it's only so important, because you're a minor. But on top of the fact that you're only fifteen, these were *unwanted advances,* is this correct?"

"Well, yeah. She's ugly."

Pagorski flinched. It was the brief, floppy little jerk you get w h e n you keep shooting a small animal with a high-caliber pistol and it's already dead.

"So did she stop?" asked Strickland.

" N o , sir. She started rubbing up and d o w n through my jeans, all the while saying,'Jesus'...Saying, and I really apologize Mr.

Strickland but you asked m e . . . S h e said every time she saw a horse's cock she 'wanted to suck it.'And that's w h e n I — "

"Ejaculated."

Kevin dropping his head to look at his lap. "Yeah. It was kind of a mess. I just ran out. I skipped class a couple of times after that, but then I came back and tried to act as if nothing happened since I didn't want to wreck my grade-point average."

" H o w ? " I m u r m u r e d under my breath. "By getting *another* B?"You shot me a glare.

"I k n o w this hasn't been easy for you, and we want to thank you, Kevin, for being so forthcoming.You can take a seat now."

" C o u l d I go sit with my parents?" he implored.

" W h y don't you sit over there with the other boys for now, because we might need to ask you a few m o r e questions. I ' m sure your parents are very proud of you."

Kevin hove back to his original perch, curling with a tinge of shame— nice touch. Meanwhile, the classroom was pin-drop silent, as parents met one another's eyes and shook their heads.

It was a bravura performance. I cannot pretend that I was not impressed.

But then I looked to Vicki Pagorski. Early in Kevin's testimony she'd emitted the odd repressed squeal, or she'd dropped her m o u t h open. But

by the time it was over she was beyond histrionics, and this was a drama teacher. She was drooped so bonelessly in her folding chair that I feared she would fall off, while the frizz of her hair evanesced into the air as if her whole head were in a state of dissolve.

Strickland turned to the drama teacher's chair, though he kept his distance. "Now, Miss Pagorski. It's your contention that this encounter never happened?"

"That's—." She had to clear her throat. "That's right."

" D o you have any idea why Kevin would tell such a story if it wasn't true?"

" N o , I don't. I can't understand it. Kevin's class is an unusually talented group, and I thought we'd been having a lot of fun. I've given him plenty of individual attention—"

"It's the individual attention he seems to have a problem with."

"I give all my students individual attention!"

" O h , Miss Pagorski, let's hope not," Strickland said sorrowfully.

O u r small audience chuckled."Now, you claim you *didn't* invite Kevin to stay after school?"

" N o t separately. I told the whole class that if they want to use my classroom to practice their scenes after school, I'd make it available."

"So you *did* invite Kevin to stay after school, then."As Pagorski sputtered, Strickland proceeded, "Have you ever admired Kevin's looks?"

"I may have said something about his having very striking features, yes. I try to instill confidence in my students—"

" H o w about this 'speaking from the diaphragm.' Did you say that?"

"Well, yes—-"

" A n d have you put your hand on his chest, to indicate where the diaphragm is?"

"Maybe, but I *never* touched him o n — "

" O r on his lower back, w h e n 'improving' his posture?"

"Possibly. He has a tendency to slump, and it ruins his—"

" W h a t about the selection from *Equus*? D i d Kevin choose this passage?"

"I recommended it."

" W h y not something from *Our Town*, or Neil Simon, a little less racy?"

"I try to find plays that students can relate to, about things that are important to t h e m — "

"Things like sex."

"Well, yes, among other things, of course—." She was getting flustered.

" D i d you describe the content of this play as 'erotic'?"

"Maybe, probably, yes! I thought that drama about adolescent sexuality and its confusions would naturally appeal—"

"Miss Pagorski, are *you* interested in adolescent sexuality?"

"Well, w h o isn't?" she cried. Someone should have given the p o o r w o m a n a shovel, so intent was she on digging her o w n grave. "But *Equus* isn't steamy and explicit, it's all symbolism—"

"Symbolism you were eager to explain. A n d did you talk about horses to Kevin?"

" O f course, the play—"

" D i d you talk about stallions, Miss Pagorski."

"Well, we did discuss what made t h e m such c o m m o n symbols of virility—"

"And what *does* make them 'virile'?"

"Well, they're muscular and very beautiful and powerful, sleek—"

"Just like teenage boys," Strickland noted sardonically. " D i d you ever draw attention to a horse's penis. To its size?"

"Maybe; h o w could you ignore it? B u t I never said—"

"Some people can't ignore it, apparently."

"You don't understand! These are young people and they're easily bored. I have to do something to get t h e m excited!"

Strickland just let that one sit there for a beat. "Yes, well," he said. "You seem to have succeeded there."

Deathly pale, Pagorski turned to our son. " W h a t did I ever do to you?"

"That's just what we're trying to find out," Strickland intervened. "But we've got more testimony to get through, and you'll have opportunity to respond. Leonard Pugh?"

Lenny m u r m u r e d to Kevin before sauntering to the center chair. Surely at any m o m e n t one of the boys would start writhing in agony because *Goody Pagorski* was smiting t h e m with evil spirits.

" N o w Leonard, you, too, m e t with your drama teacher after school?"

"Yeah, she seemed real hot to have a *conference,"* said Lenny, with his poo-making smile. His nose stud was infected again, the left nostril red and puffy. He'd recently gotten a fade, w h i c h was neo-Nazi short with the

letter Z shaved into one side. W h e n I'd asked h i m what the *Z* stood for, he'd said, *Whatever,* w h i c h I'd been forced to point out began with a W.

" C a n you tell us what happened?"

"It was just hke Kevin said. I thought we was just gonna practice and shit. A n d I come in the r o o m and she like, shuts the door? She's wearing this really short skirt, you know, you can almost see her cheeks." Lenny mugged a bit.

"And did you practice your work for class?" asked Strickland, though coaching proved quite unnecessary. More, detail proved Lenny's strong suit.

"We sure practiced something!" said Lenny. "She said, 'I've been watching you in the back row, w h e n I ' m sitting at my desk?

A n d some afternoons I get so wet I have to do myself in class!'"

Strickland looked a litde queasy. " D i d Miss Pagorski do anything that you thought was inappropriate?"

"Well then she hke, sits on the edge of her desk? W i t h her legs spread wide open. So I go up to the desk, and I can see *she's not wearing panties.* It's hke, this, wide open beaver, you know? All red and hairy, and it's just, you know, *dripping—"*

"Leonard, let's just get the facts—." Strickland was massaging his forehead. Meanwhile, chalk-stripe was twisting his tie; the redhead had her face in her hands.

"So she says, 'You want some? 'Cause I look at that bulge in your pants, and I can't keep my hands off my pussy—'"

" C o u l d you please watch your language—!" said Strickland, making desperate slashing motions at the stenographer.

" — S o if you don't do me right now, I ' m gonna shove this eraser in my hole and bring myself o f f ! ' "

"Leonard, that's e n o u g h — "

"Girls around here are pretty tight with it, so I wasn't about to pass on free pussy. So I did her, right on the desk, and you shoulda heard her begging to let her suck i t — "

"Leonard, take your seat right now."

Well, wasn't it awkward. Lenny shambled back to his chair, and Strickland announced that the board had heard enough for one night, and he thanked everyone for coming. He repeated his admonition that we not spread rumors until a decision had been made. We would be notified if any action would be taken on this case.

After the three of us had climbed into your 4x4 in silence, you finally said to Kevin, "You know, that friend of yours made you look like a liar."

"Moron," Kevin grumbled. "I should never have told him about what happened with Pagorski. He copies me in everything.

I guess I just needed to tell somebody."

" W h y didn't you come straight to me?" you asked.

"It was gross!" he said, bunched in the back seat."That whole thing back there was totally embarrassing. I should never have told anybody.You shouldn'ta made me do that."

" O n the *contrary.* "You twisted around the headrest. "Kevin, if you have a teacher whose behavior is out of bounds, I want to k n o w about it, and I want the school to k n o w about it.You have nothing to be ashamed of. Except possibly your choice of friends.

Lenny is something of a fabulist. Litde distance might be in order there, sport."

"Yeah," said Kevin. "Like to *China!'*

I don't think I said a word the whole drive back. W h e n we got h o m e I left it to you to thank R o b e r t for getting Celia, amazingly, to go to sleep without a forty-five-minute tucking-in from her mother. I was reluctant .to open my m o u t h even a litde

bit, m u c h as one might hesitate to put even a very small hole in an inflated balloon.

"Kev.Triskets?" you offered w h e n R o b e r t had left. "Sodium City, man."

" N a h . I ' m going to my room. I'll come out w h e n I can show my face again. Like in about fifty years." He m o p e d off. Unlike the stagy melancholy of the weeks to come, he seemed truly glum. He seemed to be suffering the hngering sense of injustice that would attend a tennis player w h o had valiantly distinguished himself in a game of doubles but whose partner had muffed it, so they lost the match.

You busied yourself putting stray dishes in the washer. Every piece of silverware seemed to make an extraordinary a m o u n t of noise.

"Glass of wine?"

I shook my head.You looked over sharply; I would always have a glass or two before bed, and it had been a stressful evening. But it would turn to vinegar on my tongue. And I still couldn't open my mouth. I knew we had been here before. Yet I finally apprehended that we couldn't keep visiting this place—or rather, these places; that is, we could not indefinitely occupy parallel universes of such diametrical characters without eventually inhabiting different places in the most down to earth, literal sense.

That's all it took, my turning d o w n a glass of wine, w h i c h you interpreted as hostde. In defiance of our set roles—I was the famdy booze h o u n d — y o u grabbed yourself a beer.

"It didn't seem *advisable*," you began after a vengeful swig, "to *apologize* to that Pagorski w o m a n after the hearing. That could help the defense if this ends up in court."

"It won't end up in court," I said. "We won't press charges."

"Well, I'd prefer not to put Kevin through that myself. B u t if the school board allows that perv to keep teaching—"

"This cannot continue."

Even I was not quite sure what I meant, though I felt it forcefully. You waited for me to elucidate.

"It's gone too far," I said.

"What's gone too far, Eva? C u t to the chase."

I hcked my lips. "It used to have mostly to do with us. My wall of maps. T h e n later, it was little things—eczema. B u t it's bigger now:—Celia's eye; a teacher's career. I can't keep looking the other way. N o t even for you."

"If that lady's career is on the hne, she has only herself to blame."

"I think we should consider sending h i m to boarding school.

Somewhere strict, old-fashioned. I never thought I'd say this, but maybe even a military academy."

" W h o a ! O u r son has been sexually abused, and your answer is to banish him to b o o t camp? Jesus, if some creep were interfering with *Celia* you'd be d o w n at the police station right now, filling out forms! You'd be on the

p h o n e to the *New York Times* and ten victim-support groups, and never mind a school in Annapolis—you'd never let her leave your lap!"

"That's because if Celia said someone had messed with her, the situation would be far more grave than she let on. Celia is more likely to let some dirty old geez finger her for years because she doesn't want to get the nice man in trouble."

"I k n o w what's behind this: typical double standard. A girl gets pawed at and it's o o h terrible put the sicko away. B u t a w o m a n paws all over a boy and it's gosh, lucky kid, gets his first taste, bet he really enjoyed it! Well, just because a boy responds—from physical reflex—doesn't mean it can't be a degrading, humiliating violation!"

"Professionally," I said, pressing an index fmger patiently to my forehead, "I may have been fortunate, but I've never thought of myself as all that bright. Kevin came by his intelligence from somewhere. So you must have at least considered the possibility that this whole thing was a sadistic frame-job."

"Just because Lenny Pugh's horning in on the show was b o g u s — "

"Lenny didn't 'horn in,' he just didn't learn his lines. He's lazy,

and a lousy drama student, apparendy. B u t Kevin clearly p u t the other boys up to it."

"Balls—!"

" H e didn't have to call her 'ugly.'" I shuddered, remembering.

" T h a t was twisting the knife."

" S o m e nympho seduces our o w n son, and the only person you care a b o u t — "

" H e made one mistake, did you notice? He said she locked the door. T h e n he claimed he 'ran out' after she *had her way with him.* Those doors don't even lock, you know, from the inside. I checked."

"Big deal she didn't literally lock it! He obviously felt trapped.

M o r e to the point, why in God's name would Kevin make that story up?"

"I can't say." I shrugged. "But this certainly fits."

" W i t h what?"

" W i t h a wicked and dangerous httle boy."

You looked at me clinically. " N o w , what I can't figure is whether you're trying to hurt me, or hurt him, or if this is some confused self-torture."

"This evening's witch trial was excruciating enough. We can knock out *self-torture."*

"Witches are mythical. Pedophdes are real as sin. O n e look at that loon and you could tell she was unstable."

"She's a type," I said. "She wants t h e m to hke her. She courts their favor by breaking the rules, by choosing racy plays and saying *fuck* in class. She may even like the idea of their ogling her a bit, but not at this price. And there's n o t h i n g illegal about being pathetic."

" H e didn't say she spread her legs and begged like Lenny Pugh, did he? N o , she got a little carried away and crossed a line.

He even kept his pants on. I could see it happening. That's what convinced me. He wouldn't make that part up about *through his jeans!'*

"Interesting," I said. "That's exacdy h o w I knew he was lying."

"Lost me."

" T h r o u g h his jeans. It was calculated authenticity. T h e believability was *crafted."*

"Lets get this straight.You don't believe his story because it's too believable."

"That's right," I agreed evenly. " H e may be scheming and mahcious, but his English teacher is right. He's *sharp as a tack."*

" D i d he seem as if he wanted to testify?"

" O f course not. He's a genius."

T h e n it happened.When you collapsed into the chair opposite, you did not come to a dead halt only because I had made up my m i n d and you could no more dislodge my conviction that Kevin was a Machiavellian miscreant than I could dislodge yours that he was a misunderstood choirboy. It was worse than that. Bigger.

Your face sagged much as a short time later I would see your father's droop as he emerged from his basement stairwell—as if all your features had been artificially held up by tacks that had suddenly fallen out. Why, at that m o m e n t you and your father would have appeared nearly the same age.

Franklin, I'd never appreciated h o w m u c h energy you expended to maintain the fiction that we were a broadly happy family whose trifling, transient problems just made life m o r e interesting. Maybe every family has one m e m b e r whose appointed j o b is to fabricate this attractive packaging. In any event, you had abruptly resigned. In one f o r m or another, we had visited this conversation countless times, with the habitual loyalty that sends other couples to the same holiday h o m e every summer. But at some point such couples must look about their painfully familiar cottage and admit to each other, *Next year we'll have to try somewhere else.*

You pressed your fingers into your eye sockets."I thought we could make it until the kids were out of the house." Your voice was gray. "I even thought that if we made it that far, maybe.. .But that's ten years from now, and it's too many days. I can take the years, Eva. But not the days."

I had never so fully and consciously wished that I had never borne our son. In that instant I might even have forgone Ceha, whose absence a childless woman in her fifties would not have known well enough to rue. From a young age there was only one thing I had always wanted, along with getting out of Racine, Wisconsin. And that was a good man w h o loved me and would stay true. Anything else was ancillary, a bonus, like frequent-flier miles. I could have lived without children. I couldn't live without you.

But I would have to. I had created my own Other Woman w h o happened to be a boy. I'd seen this in-house cuckolding in other families, and it's odd that I'd failed to spot it in ours. Brian and Louise had spht ten years before (all that wholesomeness had been a httle meat-and-potatoes for him, too; at a party for his fifteenth wedding anniversary, a jar of pickled walnuts smashed on the floor, and he got caught fucking his mistress in the walkin pantry), and of course Brian was far more upset about separation from those two blond moppets than about leaving Louise.

There shouldn't be any problem loving both, but for some reason certain men choose; hke good mutual-fund managers minimizing risk while maximizing portfolio yield, they take everything they once invested in their wives and sink it into children instead.

What is it? Do they seem safer, because they need you? Because you can never become their ex-father, as I might become your ex-wife? You never quite trusted me, Franklin. I took too many airplanes in the formative years, and it never entirely registered that I always bought a round-trip.

"What do you want to do?" I asked. I felt light-headed.

"Last out the school year, if we can. Make arrangements over the summer.

"At least custody is a no-brainer, isn't it?" you added sourly.

"And doesn't that say it all."

At the time, of course, we had no way of knowing that you would keep Ceha, too.

"Is it—?" I didn't want to sound pitiful. "You've decided."

"There's nothing left to decide, Eva," you said limply "It's already happened."

Had I imagined this scene—and I had not, for to picture such things is to invite them—I'd have expected to stay up until dawn draining a bottle, agonizing over what went wrong. But I sensed that if anything we would turn in early. Like toasters and sub-compacts, one only tinkers with the mechanics of a marriage in the interests of getting it up and running again; there's not much point in poking around to see where the wires have disconnected prior to throwing the contraption away. What's more, though I'd have expected to cry, I found myself all dried up; with the house overheated, my nostrils were tight and smarting, my lips cracked.

You were right, it had already happened, and I may have been in mourning for our marriage for a decade. N o w I understood how the mates of long senile spouses felt when, after dogged, debilitating visits to a nursing home, what is functionally dead succumbs to death in fact. A culminatory shudder of grief; a thrill of guilty relief. For the first time since I could remember, I relaxed. My shoulders dropped a good two inches. I sat into my chair. I sat. I may have never sat so completely. All I was doing was sitting.

Thus it took a supreme effort to hft my eyes and turn my head w h e n a flicker of motion in the mouth of the hallway distracted from the perfect stasis of our still life. Kevin took a deliberate step into the light. O n e glance confirmed that he'd been eavesdropping. He looked different.Those sordid afternoons with the bathroom door open notwithstanding, this was the first time in years I had seen him naked. Oh, he was still wearing the normal-sized clothes from the hearing. But he'd lost the sideways skew; he stood up straight. The sarcastic wrench of his mouth dropped; his features were at rest. I thought, he really is "striking,"

as his drama teacher purportedly remarked. He looked older.

But what most amazed me were his eyes. Ordinarily, they glazed with the glaucous film of unwashed apples—flat and unfocused, bored and belligerent, they shut me out. Sure, they glittered with

occasional mischief, like the closed metal doors of a smelting furnace around which a little red rim would sometimes smolder, from which stray flames would lick. But as he stepped into the kitchen, the furnace doors swung wide to bare the jets.

"I need a drink of water," he announced, somehow managing to hiss without pronouncing any S s, and strode to the sink.

"Kev," you said. "Don't take anything you might have overheard to heart. It's easy to misunderstand w h e n you hear something out of context."

" W h y would I not know the context?" He took a single swallow from his glass. "I am the context." He put the glass on the counter, and left.

I'm certain of it: That moment, that hard swallow, is w h e n he decided.

A week later, we received another letter from the school board.

Already relieved of her classes w h e n the accusations were first made, Vicki Pagorski would be permanently removed to administrative duties and never allowed direct supervision of students again. Yet in the absence of any evidence beyond the boys' word against hers, she was not to be discharged. We both found the decision cowardly, though for different reasons. It seemed to me that she was either guilty or she was not, and there was no justification for taking an innocent from an occupation that she clearly adored. *You* were outraged that she was not to be fired and that none of the other parents planned to sue.

After slumping around the house as pointedly as one can go about an exercise that is essentially rounded, Kevin confided in you that he had grown depressed. You said you could see why.

Stunned by the injustice of the school board's slap on the wrist, Kevin felt humiliated, so of course he was depressed. Equally you fretted that he had intuited an impending divorce that we both wanted to put off making official until we had to.

He wanted to go on Prozac. From my random sampling, a good half of his student body was on one antidepressant or another, though he did request *Prozac* in particular. I've always been leery of legal restoratives, and I did w o r r y about the drug's reputation for flattening; the vision of our son even more dulled to the world boggled the mind. But so rarely out of the States those days, I, too, had acculturated myself to the notion that in a country with more money, greater freedom, bigger houses, better schools, finer health care, and more unfettered opportunity than anywhere else on earth, of course an abundance of its population would be out of their minds with sorrow. So I went along with it, and the psychiatrist we sought seemed as happy to hand out fistfuls of pharmaceuticals as our dentist to issue free lollipops.

Most children are mortified by the prospect of their parents'

divorce, and I don't deny that the conversation he overheard from the hallway sent Kevin into a tailspin. Nevertheless, I was disconcerted. That boy had been trying to split us up for fifteen years. W h y wasn't he satisfied? A n d if I really was such a horror, w h y wouldn't he gladly jettison his awful mother? In retrospect, I can only assume that it was bad enough living with a w o m a n w h o was cold, suspicious, resentful, accusatory, and aloof. Only one eventuality must have seemed worse, and that was living with you, Franklin. Getting stuck with Dad.

Getting stuck with Dad the Dupe.

M A R C H 2 5 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

I have a confession to make. For all my ragging on you in these days, I've b e c o m e shamefully dependent on television. In fact, as long as I'm baring all: O n e evening last m o n t h in the middle of *Frasier,* the tube winked out cold, and I ' m afraid that I rather fell apart—banging the set, plugging and unplugging, wiggling knobs. I ' m long past weeping over *Thursday* on a dady basis, but I go into a frenzy w h e n I can't find out h o w Ndes takes the news that Daphne's going to marry Donnie.

Anyway, tonight after the usual chicken breast (a bit overcooked), I was flicking through the channels w h e n the screen suddenly filled with our son's face.You'd think I'd be used to it by now, but I ' m not. A n d this wasn't the ninth-grade school p h o t o all the papers ran—out of date, black-and-white, with its acid g r i n — b u t Kevin's more robust visage at seventeen. I recognized the interviewer's voice. It was Jack Marlin's documentary.

Marlin had ditched the dry thriller tide "Extracurricular Activities" for the punchier "Bad Boy," reminding me of you; *I'll finish off that bad boy in a couple of hours,* you'd say, about an easy scouting job. You applied the expression to just about everything save our son.

To w h o m Jack Marlin applied it readdy enough. Kevin, you see, was the star. Marlin must have gotten Claverack's consent, for interspersed with shots of the tearful aftermath—the piles of

flowers outside the gym, the memorial service, Never Again town meetings —was an exclusive interview with *KK* himself. Rattled, I almost switched it off. But after a minute or two, I was riveted.

In fact, Kevin's manner was so arresting that at first I could barely attend to what he said. He was interviewed in his dormitory cubicle—hke his room, kept in rigid order and unadorned with posters or knickknacks. Tipping his chair on two legs, hooking an elbow around its back, he looked thoroughly in his element. If anything, he seemed larger, full of himself, bursting from his tiny sweats, and I had never seen him so animated and at his ease. He basked under the camera's eye as if under a sunlamp.

Marlin was off-screen, and his questions were deferential, almost tender, as if he didn't want to scare Kevin away. W h e n I tuned in, Marlin was asking delicately whether Kevin still maintained that he was one of the tiny percentage of Prozac patients w h o had a radical and antipathetic reaction to the drug.

Kevin had learned the importance of sticking by your story by the time he was six. "Well, I definitely started feeling a little weird."

"But according to both the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the *Lancet,* a causal linkage between Prozac and homicidal psychosis is purely speculative. Do you think m o r e research—?"

"Hey," Kevin raised a palm, " I ' m no doctor.That defense was my lawyer's idea, and he was doing his job. I said I felt a little weird. But I'm not looking for an excuse here. I don't blame some satanic cult or pissy girlfriend or big bad bully w h o called me a fag. O n e of the things I can't stand about this country is lack of *accountability.* Everything Americans do that doesn't w o r k out too great has to be somebody else's fault. Me, I stand by w h a t I done. It wasn't anybody's idea but mine."

" W h a t about that sexual abuse case? Might that have left you feeling bruised?"

"Sure I was *interfered with.* But hell," Kevin added with a confidential leer, "that was *nothing* compared to what happens *here."* (They cut to an interview with Vicki Pagorski, whose

denials were apoplectic with me-thinks-thou-dost-protest-too-m u c h excess. Of course, too feeble an indignation would have seemed equally incriminating, so she couldn't win. A n d she really ought to do something about that hair.)

" C a n we talk a little about your parents, Kevin?" Marlin resumed.

Hands behind head. "Shoot."

"Your father—did you get along, or did you fight?"

"Mister Plastic?" Kevin snorted. "I should be so lucky we'd have a fight. N o , it was all cheery chirpy, hot dogs and Cheez Whiz. A total fraud, you know? All like, *Let's go to the Natural History Museum, Kev, they have some really neat-o rocks!* He was into some Litde League fantasy, stuck in the 1950s. I'd get this, /

luuuuuuv you, buddy! stuff, and I'd just look at him hke, *Who are you talking to, guy?* W h a t does that mean, your dad 'loves' you and hasn't a *[bleep]* ing clue w h o you are? What's he love, then? Some kid in *Happy Days.* N o t me."

" W h a t about your mother?"

" W h a t about her?" Kevin snapped, though untd n o w he'd been affable, expansive.

"Well, there was that civd suit brought for parental negligence—"

"Totally bogus," said Kevin flatly. " R a n k opportunism, frankly.

M o r e culture of compensation. N e x t thing you know, geezers'll be suing the government for getting old and kids'11 be taking their mommies to court because they came out ugly. My view runs, life sucks; *tough luck.* Fact is, the lawyers knew Mumsey had deep pockets, and that Woolford cow can't take bad news on the chin."

Just then the camera angle panned ninety degrees, zooming in on the room's only decoration that I could see taped over his bed. Badly creased from having been folded small enough to fit in a pocket or wallet, it was a photograph of me. Jesus Christ, it was that head-shot on an Amsterdam houseboat, which disappeared w h e n Celia was born. I was sure he'd torn it to pieces.

— 4 1 3 —

"But whether or not your m o t h e r was legally remiss," Marlin proceeded, "maybe she paid you too litde attention—?"

"Oh, lay off my mother." This sharp, menacing voice was alien to me, but it must have been useful inside."Shrinks here spend all day trying to get me to trash the woman, and I'm getting a little tired of it, if you wanna k n o w the truth."

Marlin regrouped. "Would you describe your relationship as close, then?"

"She's been all over the world, k n o w that? You can hardly name a country where she hasn't got the T-shirt. Started her o w n company. Go into any bookstore around here, you'll see her series.You know, *Smelly Foreign Dumps on a Wing and a Prayer?* I used to cruise into Barnes and Noble in the mall just to look at all those books. Pretty cool."

"So you don't think there's any way she might have—"

"Look, I could be kind of a creep, okay? A n d she could be kind of a creep, too, so we're even. Otherwise, it's *private*, okay?

Such a thing in this country anymore as *private*, or do I have to tell you the color of my underwear? N e x t question."

"I guess there's only one question left, Kevin—the big one.

W h y ' d you do it?"

I could tell Kevin had been preparing for this. He inserted a dramatic pause, then slammed the front legs of his plastic chair onto the floor. Elbows on knees, he turned from Marlin to directly address the camera.

"Okay, it's hke this. You wake up, you *watch* TV, and you get in the car and you *listen* to the radio. You go to your little j o b or your little school, but you're not going to hear about that on the 6:00 news, since guess what. *Nothing is really happening.*

You *read* the paper, or if you're into that sort of thing you *read* a book, which is just the same as watching only even m o r e boring.

You *watch* TV all night, or maybe you go out so you can *watch* a movie, and maybe you'll get a p h o n e call so you can tell your friends what you've been *watching.* And you know, it's got so bad that I've started to notice, the people on TV? *Inside* the TV? Half

the time they're *watching TV* Or if you've got some romance in a movie? W h a t do they do but *go to a movie.* All these people, Marlin," he invited the interviewer in with a nod. " W h a t are they watching?"

After an awkward silence, Marlin filled in, "You tell us, Kevin."

"People like me." He sat back and folded his arms.

Marlin would have been happy with this footage, and he wasn't about to let the show stop now. Kevin was on a roll and had that quality of just getting started. "But people watch other things than killers, Kevin," Marlin prodded.

"Horseshit," said Kevin. " T h e y want to watch something happen, and I've made a study of it: Pretty m u c h the definition of something happening is it's bad. T h e way I see it, the world is divided into the watchers and the watchees, and there's m o r e and more of the audience and less and less to

see. People w h o actually do anything are a goddamned endangered species."

" O n the contrary, Kevin," Marlin observed sorrowfully, "all too many young people hke yourself have gone on killing sprees in the last few years."

"Lucky for you, too! You need us! W h a t would you do without me, film a documentary on paint drying? W h a t are all those folks doing," he waved an arm at the camera, "but *watching* me? D o n ' t you think they'd have changed the channel by n o w if all I'd done is get an A in Geometry? Bloodsuckers! I do their dirty w o r k for them!"

"But the whole point of asking you these questions," Marlin said soothingly, "is so we can all figure out h o w to keep this sort of Columbine thing from happening again."

At the mention of *Columbine,* Kevin's face soured."I just wanna go on the record that those two weenies were not pros. Their bombs were duds, and they shot plain old anybody. No standards.

My crowd was handpicked. T h e videos those morons left behind were totally embarrassing. They copied me, and their whole operation was obviously designed to o n e - u p Gladstone—"

Marlin tried quietly to intrude something like, "Actually, police claim that Klebold and Harris were planning their attack for at least a year," but Kevin plowed on.

" N o t h i n g , not one thing in that circus went according to plan. It was a 100-percent failure from top to bottom. No wonder those miserable twits wasted themselves—and I thought that was chicken. Part of the package is facing the music. Worst of all, they were hopeless geeks. I've read sections of Klebold's whining, snot-nosed journal. K n o w one of the groups that c h

u m p wanted to avenge himself against? *People who think they can predict the weather.* H a d no idea what kind of a statement they were making.

O h , and get this—at the end of the Big Day, those two losers were originally planning to *hijack a jet* and *fly it into the World Trade Center.* Give me a break!"

"You, ah, note that your victims were 'handpicked,'" said Marlin, w h o must have been wondering, *What was that about?*

" W h y those particular students?"

" T h e y happened to be the people w h o got on my nerves. I mean, if you were planning a major operation hke this, wouldn't *you* go for the priss-pots and faggots and eyesores you couldn't stand? Seems to me that's the main perk of taking the rap. You and your cameramen here leech off my accomplishments, and you get a fancy salary and your name in the credits. Me, I have to do time. Gotta get something out of it."

"I have one m o r e question, Kevin, t h o u g h I ' m afraid you may have answered it already," said Marlin w i t h a tragic note.

" D o you feel any remorse? K n o w i n g w h a t you do now, if you could go back to April 8th, 1999, w o u l d you kill those people all over again?"

"I'd only do one thing different. I'd put one right between the eyes of that Lukronsky dork, who's been making a mint off his *terrible ordeal* ever since. I read he's n o w gonna be *acting* in that Miramax flick! Feel sorry for the cast, too. He'll be quoting *Let's get in character* from *Pulp Fiction* and doing his Harvey Keitel imitations and I bet in Hollywood that shit gets old quick. And

while we're on that, I wanna complain that Miramax and everybody should be paying me some kind of fee. They're stealing my story, and that story

was a lot of work. I don't think it's legal to swipe it for free."

"But it's against the law in this state for criminals to profit f r o m — "

Again, Kevin swung to the camera. " M y story is about all I got to my name right now, and that's w h y I feel robbed. B u t a story's a w h o l e lot more than most people got. All you people watching out there, you're listening to w h a t I say because I have something you don't: *I got plot.* B o u g h t and paid for.

That's w h a t all you people want, and w h y you're sucking off me. You want my plot. I k n o w h o w you feel, too, since hey, I used to feel the same way. TV and video games and movies and c o m p u t e r screens...On April 8th, 1999,1 j u m p e d *into* the screen, I switched to watchee. Ever since, I've k n o w n w h a t my life is about. I give good story. It may have been kinda gory, but admit it, *you all loved it.* You *ate it up.* Nuts, I o u g h t to be on some government payroll. W i t h o u t people like me, the w h o l e country w o u l d j u m p off a bridge, 'cause the only thing on TV

is some housewife on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* w i n n i n g $64,000 for r e m e m b e r i n g the n a m e of the president's dog."

I turned off the set. I couldn't take any more. I could feel another interview with Thelma Corbitt coming up, b o u n d to include an appeal for the "Love for Kids with Determination"

scholarship fund she'd set up in Denny's honor, to w h i c h I'd already contributed more than I could afford.

Obviously, this flashy thesis about the passive spectating of m o d e r n life was but a twinkle in Kevin's eye two years ago. He has time on his hands at Claverack, and he'd knocked together that fancy motive in m u c h the way older convicts manufacture vanity license plates. Still, I reluctantly have to admit that his post hoc exegesis contained a nugget of truth. Were N B C to broadcast an unabating string of documentaries on the mating habits of sea otters, viewership would dwindle. Listening to

Kevin's diatribe, I was struck despite myself by what a sizable proportion of our species feeds off the depravity of a handful of reprobates, if n o t to earn a living then to pass the time. It isn't only journalists, either. T h i n k tanks generating mountains of paper over the sovereign disposition of fractious little East Timor. University Conflict Studies departments issuing c o u n t -

less Ph.D.s on E T A terrorists w h o n u m b e r no m o r e than 100.

Filmmakers generating millions by dramatizing the predations of lone serial killers. A n d think of it: the courts, police, National G u a r d — h o w m u c h of government is the m a n a g e m e n t of the wayward 1 percent? W i t h prison building and warding one of the biggest growth industries in the U n i t e d States, a sudden popular conversion to civilization across the board could trigger a recession. Since I myself had craved a *turn of the page*, is it really such a stretch to say of *KK* that we need him? Beneath his bathetic disguise, Jack Marlin had sounded grateful. He wasn't interested in the mating habits of sea otters, and he was *grateful.*

Otherwise, Franklin, my reaction to that interview is very confusing. A customary horror mixes w i t h something h k e —pride. He was lucid, self-assured, engaging. I was touched by that photograph over his bed, and no little chagrined that he hadn't destroyed it after all (I guess I've always assumed the worst). Recognizing snippets of his soliloquy f r o m my o w n tirades at table, I ' m n o t only mortified, but flattered. A n d I ' m thunderstruck that he has ever ventured into a Barnes and N o b l e to gaze at my handiwork, for which his " M e e t My M o t h e r "

essay didn't betray great respect.

But I ' m dismayed by his unkind remarks about you, which I hope you don't take to heart.You tried so hard to be an attentive, affectionate father.Yet I did warn you that children are unusually alert to artifice, so it makes sense that it's your very effort that he derides. A n d you can understand w h y in relation to you of all people he feels compelled to portray himself as the victim.

I was grilled at length by Mary's lawyers about the "warning

signs" that I should have picked up sufficiently in advance to have headed off calamity, but I think most mothers would have f o u n d the tangible signals difficult to detect. I did ask about the purpose of the five chain-and-padlock Kryptonites w h e n they were delivered to our door by FedEx, since Kevin had a bike lock, along with a bike he never rode.Yet his explanation seemed credible: He'd come across a terrific deal on the Internet, and he planned to sell these Kryptonites, which went for about $100

apiece retad, at school for a profit. If he'd never before displayed such entrepreneurial spunk, the aberration only seems glaring n o w that we k n o w what the locks were for. H o w he got hold of school stationery I've no idea, and I never ran across it. And w h d e he laid in a generous supply of arrows for his crossbow over a period of months, he never ordered more than half a dozen at a time. He was always ordering arrows, and the stockpde, which he kept outside in the shed, didn't attract my attention.

T h e one thing that I did notice through the rest of December and the early months of 1999 was that Kevin's *Gee, Dad* routine n o w extended to *Gee, Mumsey.* I don't k n o w h o w you put up with it. *Gosh, are we having some of that great Armenian food tonight?*

Terriffl I sure want to learn more about my ethnic heritage! Lots of guys at school are plain old white-bread, and they're superjealous that I'm a member of a real-live persecuted minority! Insofar as he had any tastes in food at all, he hated Armenian cuisine, and this disingenuous boppiness hurt my feelings. W i t h me, Kevin's behavior had been hitherto as unadorned as his bedroom—stark, lifeless, sometimes hard and abrasive, but (or so I imagined) uncamouflaged. I preferred that. It was a surprise to discover that my son could come to seem even farther away.

I interpreted his transformation as induced by that conversation in the kitchen that he'd overheard—to which neither you n o r I had alluded again, even in private. O u r prospective separation l o o m e d as a great smelly elephant in the living r o o m , t r u m p e t i n g occasionally or leaving behind massive piles of manure for us to trip over.

Yet astonishingly, our marriage blossomed into a second h o n e y m o o n , remember? We pulled off that Christmas with unequaled warmth. You secured me a signed copy of Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate,* as well as Michael J. Aden's *Passage to Ararat,* Armenian classics. In turn, I gave you a copy of *Alistair Cooke's America* and a biography of R o n a l d Reagan. If we were poking f u n at one another, the teasing was tender. We indulged Kevin w i t h some sports clothes that were grotesquely too small, while Celia, typically, was every bit as entranced with the bubble wrap it came in as with her glass-eyed antique doll. We made love m o r e often than we had in years under the implicit guise of for-old-time's-sake.

I was unsure whether you were reconsidering a summer split or were merely impelled by guilt and grief to make the most of what was irrevocably terminal. In any event, there is something relaxing about hitting bottom. If we were about to get a divorce, nothing worse could possibly happen.

Or so we thought.

A

A P R I L 5 , 2 0 0 1

Dear Franklin,

I k n o w it's b o u n d to be a touchy subject for you. But I promise, if you hadn't given him that crossbow for Christmas, it would have been the longbow or poison darts. For that matter, Kevin was sufficiently resourceful to have capitalized on the Second A m e n d m e n t and would have laid hands on the more conventional arsenal of pistols and deer rifles that his more m o d e r n - m i n d e d colleagues prefer. Frankly, traditional School Shooting instruments would not only have improved his margin of error but would have heightened the likelihood that he could best the competition in fatalities—clearly one of his driving ambitions, since before those Columbine upstarts came along twelve days later, he topped the charts. A n d you can be sure that he considered this issue at great length. He said himself at fourteen, " C h o i c e of weapons is half the fight." So on the face of it, the archaic selection is peculiar. It handicapped him, or so it would seem.

He may have liked that. Maybe I passed on my o w n inclination to rise to a challenge, the very impulse that got me pregnant with the boy in the first place. A n d though he may have enjoyed sticking his mother, w h o fancied herself so "special," with the insult of cliche—like it or not, little Ms. International Traveler would b e c o m e one more assembly-line mother of a tacky American type, and he k n e w h o w m u c h it pained me that my sassy VW Luna was n o w every fifth car in the Northeast—he

still liked the idea of setting himself apart. Since after Columbine he grumbled in Claverack that "any idiot can fire a shotgun,"

he must have recognized that being "the crossbow kid" would mark his little prank in the popular imagination. Indeed, by the spring of 1999 the field was crowded, and the once indelibly impressed names of Luke Woodham and Michael Carneal were already beginning to fade.

Moreover, he was certainly showing off. Maybe Jeff Reeves played a mean guitar riff, Soweto Washington could swish his free-throws, and Laura Woolford could get the whole football team to ogle her slim behind as it twitched down the hall, but Kevin Khatchadourian could put an arrow through an apple—or an ear—from fifty meters.

Nevertheless, I'm convinced that his leading motivation was ideological. N o t that "I got plot" nonsense he fobbed off on Jack Marlin. Rather, I have in mind the "purity" he admired in the computer virus. Having registered the social compulsion to derive some broad, trenchant lesson from every asinine murder spree, he must have painstakingly parsed the prospective fallout from his own.

His father, at least, was forever dragging him off to some cluttered Native American museum or dreary Revolutionary War battlefield, so that anyone w h o tried to portray him as the neglected victim of the self-centered two-career marriage would have an uphill battle, and whatever he may have intuited, we were not divorced: no copy there. He wasn't a member of a satanic cult; most of his friends didn't go to church either, so godlessness was unlikely to emerge as a cautionary theme. He wasn't picked on—he had his unsavory friends, and his contemporaries went out of their way to leave him be—so the poor-persecuted-misfit, we-must-do-something-to-stop-bullying-in-schools number wouldn't go very far. Unlike the mental incontinents he held in such contempt, w h o passed malignant notes in class and made extravagant promises to confidants, he'd kept his mouth shut; he hadn't posted a homicidal web site or written essays about blowing up the school, and the most creative social commentator would be hard-pressed to deploy a satire about sports utility vehicles as one of those unmissable "warning signs" that are n o w meant to drive vigdant parents and teachers to call confidential hotlines. But best of all, if he accomplished his stunt entirely with a mere crossbow, his mother and all her mush-headed liberal friends wouldn't be able to parade him before Congress as one more

poster boy for gun control. In short, his choice of weapon was meant to ensure to the best of his ability that *Thursday* would mean absolutely nothing.

W h e n I got up at the usual 6:30 A.M. on April 8, 1999,1 wasn't yet impelled to put that day of the week in itahcs. I picked out a blouse I rarely wore; you bent to me as I buttoned it in the mirror and said that I might not like to admit it, but I looked good in pink, and you kissed my temple. In those days your smallest kindness was w r i t large, and I blushed with pleasure. O n c e again I h o p e d you might be having second thoughts about separation, although I was reluctant to ask you outright and so risk spoding the illusion. I made coffee, then roused Celia, helping her to clean and replace her prosthesis. She was still having trouble with discharge, and wiping the yellow crust off the glass and out of her eyelashes and tear duct could take a good ten minutes.Though it is amazing what you get used to, I still felt relieved once the glass eye was in, her watery blue gaze restored.

Aside from the fact that Kevin got up without having to be rousted three times, it began as a normal morning. As ever, I marveled at your appetite, recendy revived; you may have been the last WASP in America w h o still regularly breakfasted on two eggs, bacon, sausage, and toast. I could never manage more than coffee, but I loved the sizzle of smoked pork, the fragrance of browning bread, and the general atmosphere of relish for the day ahead that this ritual fostered. T h e sheer vigor with which you prepared this feast must have scrubbed your arteries of its consequences.

"Look at you!" I exclaimed w h e n Kevin emerged. I was carefully frying Celia's French toast completely dry, lest a little undercooked egg seem like *slime.* " W h a t happened, were all your size-one clothes in the wash?"

"Some days you just wake up," he said, tucking his billowing white fencing shirt into the same rippling black rayon slacks he had w o r n to H u d s o n House, "with a sense of occasion."

In plain view, he packed the five Kryptonite locks and chains into his backpack. I assumed he'd found takers at school.

"Kevin looks really handsome," said Celia shyly.

"Yup, your brother's a heartbreaker," I said. A n d wouldn't he be.

I sifted a generous dusting of confectioner's sugar over the toast, stooping by Celia's soft blond hair to mumble, " N o w don't dawdle, you don't want to be late for school again. You're supposed to eat it, not make friends with it."

I tucked her hair behind her ears and kissed the top of her head, and as I did so Kevin cut a glance toward me as he loaded the backpack with another chain. T h o u g h he'd entered the kitchen with a rare energy, n o w his eyes had gone dead.

"Hey, Kev!" you cried. "I ever show you h o w this camera works? G o o d knowledge of photography never hurt anybody; it's sure paid off for me. Get over here, there's time. I don't k n o w what's got into you, but you have forty-five minutes to spare."

You pushed your greasy plate out of the way and opened the camera bag at your feet.

Unwillingly, Kevin floated over. He didn't seem in the m o o d for *Gee-Dadding* this morning. As you went through the lighting and f-stop positions, I felt a pang of recognition. Your o w n father's awkward version of intimacy was always to explain in far greater detail than anyone cared to hear exacdy h o w some device worked.You didn't share Herbert's conviction that to take apart the clockwork of the universe was to unlock the extent of its mysteries, but you had inherited a resort to mechanics as an emotional crutch.

"This reminds me," you said mid-instruction. "I want to shoot a roll of you at archery practice sometime soon. Capture that steely gaze and steady arm for posterity, h o w about it? We could do a whole photomontage for the foyer: Braveheart of the Palisades!"

Slapping his shoulder was probably a mistake; he flinched.

And for the briefest of moments I appreciated what little access we ever had to what really went on in Kevin's head, since for a second the mask fell, and his face curdled with—well, with revulsion, I ' m afraid. To allow even so brief a glimpse of its workings, he must have had other things on his mind.

"Yeah. *Dad*," he said effortfully. " T h a t would be.. .*great!'*

Yet I chose this of all mornings to gaze u p o n our domestic tableau in soft focus. All teenagers hate their parents, I thought, and there was something priceless about the antipathy if you could take it. As the sun caught the fine gold of Celia's hair while she cut her French toast into ridiculously tiny pieces and you embarked on a riff about the dangers of backlighting while Kevin twitched with impatience, I was so heartened by this N o r m a n Rockwell m o m e n t that I considered sticking around until the kids had to leave for school, maybe giving Celia a lift myself instead of leaving the run to you.Would that I had given in to the temptation! But children need routine, I decided, and if I didn't get a j u m p on the m o r n i n g rush hour, there would be hell to pay on the bridge.

"Shut up!" Kevin barked suddenly at your side."That's *enough.*

Shut *up!"*

Warily, we all three peered at this unprompted impertinence.

"I don't *care* h o w your camera works," he continued levelly.

"I don't *want* to be a location scout for a bunch of crappy products. I ' m *not interested.* I'm not interested in *baseball* or the *founding fathers* or *decisive battles* of the *Civil War.* I hate *museums* and *national monuments* and

picnics. I don't want to memorize the *Declaration of Independence* in my spare time, or read *de Tocqueville.*

I can't stand reruns of *Tora, Tora, Tora!* or documentaries about

Dwight Eisenhower. I don't want to play *Frisbee* in the backyard or one more game *of Monopoly* with a sniveling, candy-ass, o n e -

eyed midget. I don't give a *fuck* about *stamp collecting* or *rare coins* or pressing *coloful autumn leaves* in encyclopedias. And I've had it up to my eyeballs with *heart-to-heart father-son talks* about aspects of my life that are *none of your business."*

You looked stunned. I met your eyes, then just perceptibly shook my head. It was unusual for me to counsel restraint.

But the pressure cooker was very popular among my mother's generation. After an incident n o w mythic in my family involving *madagh* scraped off the ceiling with a broom, I'd learned at an early age that w h e n that chittering round whistle is blowing off steam, the worst thing you can do is open the pot.

"Okay," you said tightly, fitting your lenses back in the case.

"You're on the record."

As abruptly as he had exploded, Kevin folded right back up, once again the complacent, unimaginative tenth-grader preparing for another h u m d r u m day of school. I could see him shutting out your hurt feelings, one more thing in which, I suppose, he was *not interested.* For about five minutes no one said anything, and then we gradually resumed the pretense of an ordinary morning, making no mention of Kevin's outburst the way polite people are meant to pretend they didn't notice the release of a very loud fart.

Still the smell lingered, if less of gas than of cordite.

Although by n o w in a hurry, I had to say good-bye to Celia twice. I stooped and brushed her hair, picked a last bit of crust from her lower lash, reminded her which books she had to take today, and then gave her a big long hug, but after I'd turned to collect my things, I noticed her still standing there where I'd left her looking stricken, hands held stiffly out from her side as if contaminated with *drydirt.* So I hoisted her by the armpits into my arms, though she was nearly eight n o w and supporting her full weight was hard on my back. She wrapped her legs around my waist, buried her head in my neck, and said,"I'll miss you!" I said I would miss her, too, though I had no idea h o w much.

— 4 2 6 —

Perhaps unnerved by Kevin's unwarranted harangue and in need of safe harbor, your o w n kiss good-bye was for once not an absent peck on the cheek, but feverish, o p e n - m o u t h e d . (Thank you, Franklin. I have relived that m o m e n t so many times n o w that the m e m o r y cells must be pale and broken down, like the denim of much-loved jeans.) As for my earher uncertainty over w h e t h e r children enjoy watching their parents kiss, one look at Kevin's face setded the matter. They didn't.

"Kevin, you have that independent study archery for gym today, don't you?" I reminded him, keen to consolidate our normality while bustling into my spring coat. " D o n ' t forget to bring your kit."

"You can count on it."

"Also, you should make up your m i n d what you want to do for your birthday," I said. "It's only three days away, and sixteen is something of a mdestone, don't you think?"

" I n some ways," he said noncommittally. "Ever notice h o w *milestone* turns into *millstone* by changing only o n e letter?"

" W h a t about Sunday!"

"I might be tied up."

I was frustrated that he always made it so difficult to be nice to him, but I had to go. I didn't kiss Kevin lately—teenagers didn't hke it—so I brushed the back of my hand lightly against his forehead, which I was surprised to find damp and cold. "You're a little clammy. Do you feel all right?"

" N e v e r better," said Kevin. I was on my way out the door w h e n he called, "Sure you don't want to say good-bye to Celie *one more time?"*

"Very funny," I said behind me, and closed the door. I thought he was just riding me. In retrospect, he was giving me very sound advice that I really ought to have taken.

I have no idea what it must be hke to wake up, with such a terrible resolve. W h e n e v e r I picture it, I see myself rolhover on the pillow muttering, *On second thought, I can't be bothered,* or at the very

least, *Screw it, I'll do it tomorrow.* And t o m o r r o w and tomorrow.

Granted, the horrors we like to t e r m "unthinkable" are altogether thinkable, and coundess kids must fantasize about revenge for the thousand natural shocks that tenth-graders are heir to. It's not the visions or even half-baked plans that set our son apart. It's the staggering capacity to travel from plan to action.

Having racked my brains, the only analogy I've located in my o w n life is an awful stretch: all those trips to foreign countries that, up against it, I really didn't want to take. I would ease myself through by breaking a seemingly m o n u m e n t a l excursion into its smallest constituent parts. R a t h e r than dare myself to spend two m o n t h s in thief-riddled Morocco, I would dare myself to pick up the phone. That's not so hard. A n d with a m

i n i o n on its other end, I would have to say something, so I would order a ticket, taking refuge in the mercifully theoretical nature of airline schedules on dates at such marvelous remove that they could never possibly c o m e to pass. Behold, a ticket arrives in the mail: Plan becomes action. I would dare myself to purchase histories of N o r t h Africa, and I would later dare myself to pack.

T h e challenges, broken down, were surmountable. Until, after daring myself into a taxi and down a jetway, it would be too late to turn back. Big deeds are a lot of little deeds one after the other, and that's w h a t Kevin must have cottoned o n t o — o r d e r i n g his Kryptonites, stealing his stationery, loading those chains into his backpack one by one. Take care of the components, and the sum of their parts unfolds as if by magic.

For my own part that Thursday—still plain old Thursday—I was busy; we were rushing to meet a due date at the printers. But in the odd unoccupied moment, I did reflect on Kevin's peculiar outburst that morning. T h e diatribe had been signally absent the *like* s, *I means, sort ojs,* and *I guesses* that commonly peppered his passable imitation of a regulation teenager. Rather than slump at an angle, he had stood upright, speaking from the center of his m o u t h rather than out one corner. I was certainly distressed that he would hurt his father's feelings with such abandon, but

the young man w h o made these stark, unmediated declarations seemed a very different boy than the one I lived with every day.

I found myself hoping we would meet again, especially at such a time that this stranger-son's state of mind was more agreeable—an unlikely prospect that to this day I continue to look forward to.

Around 6:15 P.M., there was a c o m m o t i o n outside my office, a conspiratorial huddling by my staff, w h i c h I interpreted as a sociable gossip as they knocked off for the day. Just as I was resigning myself to working into the evening on my own, Rose, their elected representative I

suppose, knocked tentatively on my door. "Eva," she said gravely. "Your son's at Gladstone High School, isn't he?"

It was already on the Internet.

T h e detads were incomplete: "Fatalities Feared in Gladstone High Shooting." W h o and h o w many students had been shot was unclear.The culprit was u n k n o w n . In fact, the news flash was exasperatingly brief. "Security staff " had come u p o n "a scene of carnage" in the school gym, to w h i c h police were n o w "trying to gain access." I k n o w I was flustered, but it didn't make the shghtest bit of sense to me.

I immediately called your mobde, cursing w h e n it was turned off; you did that all too often, treasuring the uninterrupted solitude of your 4x4 as you tooled around N e w Jersey searching for the right-colored cows. I appreciated that you didn't want to hear from a rep from Kraft or your Madison Avenue minders, but you might have thought to turn it on for me. What's the point of *having* the damned thing? I fretted. I called h o m e but got our machine; it was a lovely spring evening, and doubdess R o b e r t had taken Celia out in the backyard to play. T h e fact that Kevin didn't pick up made my stomach churn, but I reasoned feverishly that of course he could have slunk off with Lenny Pugh, with w h o m he had inexplicably patched things up since the Pagorski hearing. Perhaps the trade in slavish disciples was not so brisk that a self-abasing sidekick could be easdy replaced.

So I grabbed my coat and resolved to go straight to the school.

As I left, my staff was already regarding me with the awe that attends those w h o have even the most tangential association with the cameo news flash on the America On-Line home page.

As we follow me running down to the garage to my VW, gunning out of midtown only to get stuck on the West Side Highway, let's get one thing straight. I did think Kevin screamed in his crib out of free-floating rage, and not because he needed feeding. I fiercely believed that when he poked fun

at our waitress's "poopy face" he knew he would hurt her feelings, and that he defaced the maps on my study walls out of calculated malice, not misguided creativity. I was still convinced that he systematically seduced Violetta into clawing a layer of skin from the better part of her body and that he continued to require diapers until he was six years old not because he was traumatized or confused or slow to develop, but because he was on a full-time war-footing with his mother. I thought he destroyed the toys and storybooks I painstakingly fashioned because they were worth more to him as emblems of his own up-yours ingratitude than as sentimental playthings, and I was sure that he learned to count and read in secret deliberately to deprive me of any sense of usefulness as a parent. My certainty that he was the one w h o flipped the quick-release on the front wheel of Trent Corley's bicycle was unwavering. I was under no illusion that a nest of bagworms had dropped into Celia's backpack by itself or that she had climbed twenty feet up our white oak only to get stranded on an upper branch all by her lonesome; I believed it was no more her idea to stir together a lunch of petroleum jelly and Thai curry paste than it was to play "kidnapping" and "William Tell." I was pretty damned sure that whatever Kevin whispered in the ear of let-us-call-her-Alice at that eighth-grade school dance, it wasn't admiration of her dress; and however Liquid-Plumr got in Celia's left eye, I was dead positive that her brother had something to do with it beyond his role as her noble savior. I regarded his jerking off at home with the door wide open as wanton sexual abuse—of his mother—and not the normal uncontrolled bubbling of

adolescent hormones. Although I may have told Mary that Laura should *suck it up,* I found it entirely credible that our son had told her frail, underfed daughter that she was fat. It was no mystery to *me* h o w a hit list turned up in Miguel Espinoza's locker, and t h o u g h I took full responsibility for spreading one to my o w n company, I couldn't see the hobby of collecting computer viruses as anything but disturbed and degenerate. I remained firmly of the view that Vicki Pagorski had been persecuted in a show trial of Kevin Khatchadourian's personal contrivance.

Granted, I'd b e e n mistaken about our son's responsibility for chucking chunks of bricks at oncoming cars on 9W, and until ten days ago I had chalked up the disappearance of a treasured photograph from Amsterdam as yet another victim of my son's unparalleled spite. So I have, as I said, always believed the worst. But even my unnatural maternal cynicism had its limits. W h e n R o s e told me there'd been a vicious assault at Kevin's high school and some students were feared dead, I worried for his well-being. N o t for an instant did I imagine that our son was the perpetrator.

T h e testimony of witnesses to an event is notoriously shambolic, especially on its immediate heels. On-scene, misinformation rules.

Only after the fact is order imposed on chaos. Hence, with a few keystrokes on-line I can n o w access numerous versions of our son's actions that day that make crude chronological sense. Few pieces of this tale were available to me w h e n I careened into the school parking lot with the radio on, but years of contemplative reflection spread before me for the leisurely assembly of this hobbyistic jigsaw, m u c h as Kevin himself has years m o r e access to underequipped w o o d shops in w h i c h to fde, sand, and polish his excuse.

Schools do not necessarily regard their letterhead stationery as the keys to the kingdom, and I doubt it's all locked up. However he acquired it, Kevin had paid enough attention in Dana Rocco's English class to digest that f o r m dictates tone. As you do not use popular slang in an article for the school paper, neither do you indulge nihilistic little games involving three-letter words w h e n printing on letterhead stationery. Hence, the official missive sent to Greer Ulanov, for example—in sufficient advance to allow for Nyack's lackluster postal service—exhibits the same keen ear for authenticity that Kevin displayed in playing R o n Howard to you and the shy, flustered victim to Alan Strickland:

Dear *Greer*

T h e faculty of Gladstone High School is proud of *all* their students, each of w h o m contributes his or her o w n remarkable talents to the community.Yet certain students invariably come to our attention as having distinguished themselves in the arts or having done even more than their

share in shaping a dynamic educational environment. We are pleased to reward this unusual excellence at the end of the school year.

In consultation with teachers and staff, I have compiled a list of nine exemplary students w h o seem most worthy of our n e w Bright and Shining Promise Award. I am delighted to i n f o r m you that you are one of these nine, singled out for your outstanding contributions in *politics and civic awareness.*

In furtherance of this process, we are asking all BSPA winners to assemble in the gym on Thursday, April 8 at 3:30 P.M. It is our hope that you can begin to put together an assembly program for early June in which the BSPA prizes will be awarded. Some demonstration of your

exceptional gifts would be appropriate. Those of you in the arts can readily demonstrate your skills; others with more academic talents may have to exercise creativity as to h o w best to exemplify your accomplishments.

W h i l e we have made our decisions based solely on merit, we have tried to arrive at a mix of gender, race, ethnicity, rehgion, and sexual preference so that the BSPA will suitably reflect our community's diversity.

Lasdy, I would implore you all to please keep your

selection for this award to yourselves. If I hear of any boasting, the administration may be forced to reconsider your candidacy. We truly wish it were possible to give *every* student a prize for being the very special person that he or she is, and it is very important that you not cause unnecessary jealousy before the award winners are made public.

My heartfelt congratulations.

Sincerely,

Donald Bevons

Principal

Identical notices were sent to eight other students, with the blanks filled in accordingly. D e n n y Corbitt was c o m m e n d e d for acting, Jeff Reeves for classical guitar, Laura Woolford for

"personal grooming," Brian " M o u s e " Ferguson for computing skills, Ziggy R a n d o l p h not only for ballet but for "encouraging tolerance of difference," Miguel Espinoza for academic achievement and "vocabulary skills," Soweto Washington for sports, Joshua Lukronsky for "cinematic studies" and-—I fault Kevin here for not being able to control himself —"memorizing w h o l e Q u e n t i n Tarantino scripts," t h o u g h most people are disinclined to regard flattery with suspicion. Dana R o c c o was sent a somewhat different letter that requested she chair this Thursday meeting but also advising that she herself had been selected for the Most Beloved Teacher Award and likewise requesting, since all the other teachers are *also* beloved, that she keep her M B T A on the q.t.

If the trap was well set, it was not i m m u n e to glitches. Dana R o c c o might have mentioned the meeting to Bevons, w h o would have protested ignorance, and the whole business might have come unraveled. Can we really call Kevin *lucky*? She didn't.

On the evening of Aprd 7, Kevin set his alarm for half an h o u r earlier than usual and laid out clothing for the m o r n i n g roomy enough to allow for ease of mobility, choosing that dashing white shirt with billowing fencing-style sleeves in which he might photograph well. Personally, I would have tossed through such a night in anguish, but then I personally would never have contrived this grotesque project in the first place, so I can only assume that if Kevin lost any sleep it was from excitement.

R i d i n g the school bus the following m o r n i n g he would have been encumbered—those bike locks weighed 6.2 pounds apiece—but Kevin had arranged for this independent-study archery course at the beginning of the semester, interest in the unpopular pastime being too shght for a proper class. O t h e r students had been trained to regard his lugging archery equipment to school as ordinary. No one was sufficiently attuned to the

niceties of this dorky sport to be disturbed that Kevin wasn't lugging his standard b o w or his longbow but his crossbow, which the administration later bent over backward to deny would ever have been allowed on school grounds. T h o u g h the n u m b e r of arrows in his possession was considerable—he was obliged to cart them in his duffel—no one remarked on the bag; the wide berth that his classmates allowed Kevin in eighth grade had by his sophomore year only broadened.

After stashing his archery materiel, as usual, in the equipment r o o m of the gym, he attended all of his classes. In English, he asked Dana R o c c o what *maleficence* means, and she beamed.

His independent-study archery practice was scheduled for the last period of the day, and—his enthusiasm firmly established—PE

teachers no longer checked up on him as he fired arrows into a sawdust target. Hence, Kevin had ample time to clear the gym of any apparatuses such as punching bags, horses, or heavy tumbling mats. Conveniendy, the bleachers were already up, and to make sure they stayed up, he chpped small combination padlocks around the intersection of two iron supports on b o t h banks, ensuring that they could not fold out. W h e n he was finished there was absolutely nothing in that gym except six blue mats—the thin kind, for sit-ups—arranged in a convivial circle in the middle.

T h e logistics, for those impressed by such things, were impeccably worked out. T h e physical education building is a

freestanding structure, a good three-minute walk from the main campus. There are five entrances to the central gym itself—from the boys' and girls' locker rooms and the equipment room, as well as from the lobby; a door on the second floor opens onto an alcove, used for the aerobic conditioning machines, that overlooks the gym. Yet not one of these entrances lies on the outside of the building. The gym is unusually high, a full two stories, and

there are windows only at the top; you can't see inside from ground level. There were no sporting events scheduled for that afternoon.

T h e bell rang at 3:00, and by 3:15 the distant clamor of departing students was dying down. T h e gym itself was deserted, though Kevin must have still padded with trepidation as he glided into the boys' locker room and unlooped his first Kryptonite bike lock from around his shoulder. He's a methodical person in the most ordinary of circumstances, so we can be sure that he had twist-tied the correct key to each bright yellow, plastic-coated padlock. Looping the heavy chain around each handle of the double doors, he pulled the chain taut. After hiking up the chain's protective black nylon sheath, he hooked the sunny yellow padlock into a middle link, clicked the lock shut, twisted the round key from its socket, and slipped it in his pocket. I dare say he tested the doors, which would now only open with a crack between them before they seized. He repeated this exercise in the girls' locker room, then at the gym entrance from the equipment room, exiting from its back door into the weights room.

I n o w know that these locks were state-of-the-art in bicycle security. T h e U-shaped portion of the tiny, sturdy padlock is only about two inches high, denying prospective thieves the leverage for a crowbar. T h e chain itself is forged interlinking at the factory; each link is half an inch thick. Kryptonite chains are famously resistant to heat, since professional cycle thieves have been known to use torches, and the company is sufficiently confident of its technology that if your bicycle is stolen, it guarantees a full refund

for the purchase value of the bike. Unlike many competitors'

models, the guarantee is even good in N e w York.

Despite his avowed disinterest in your work, Franklin, Kevin was about to launch Kryptonite's most successful advertising campaign to date.

By 3:20, giggling with self-congratulatory glee, the first BSPA winners were starting to arrive through the main entrance from the lobby, which remained unlocked.

"Personal hygiene, my *mommal"* Soweto declared.

"Hey, we're *bright and shining*," said Laura, tossing her silken brown hair. " D o n ' t we get any chairs?"

M o u s e crossed to the equipment r o o m to scrounge some fold-ups, but w h e n he came back reporting the r o o m already locked for the day Greer said, "I don't know, it's kind of neat this way. We can sit cross-legged, like around a campfire."

"Puh-lease? said Laura, whose outfit was—scant. "Cross-legged, in this skirt? And it's Versace, for Chrissake. I don't want to stink it up with sit-up sweat."

"Yo, girl," Soweto nodded at her spindly figure, "that close as you gonna come to *sit-up sweat."*

Kevin was able to listen in on his prizewinners from the alcove, an inset shelf on the upper level; so long as he remained against the back wall, he couldn't be seen from below. T h e three stationary bicycles, treadmill, and rowing machine had already been dragged away from the alcove's protective railing.Transferred from the duffel, his stash of some hundred arrows bristled from two fire buckets.

Enticed by the marvelous echo, D e n n y emoted a few lines from *Don't Drink the Water* at the top of his lungs, while Ziggy, w h o made a habit of flouncing around school in a leotard and tights to show off his calves, couldn't resist making what Kevin later called "a big queeny entrance," dancing a series of turns in *pointe* position across the length of the gym and finishing with a *grand jete.* But Laura, w h o doubtless thought it uncool to ogle fags, only had eyes for Jeff Reeves—though quiet and terminally earnest, a handsome blue-eyed boy with a long blond ponytad with w h o m a dozen girls were k n o w n to be smitten. O n e of Jeff's salivating fans, according to an interview with a friend recorded by N B C , was Laura

Woolford, which m o r e than his mastery of the twelve-string guitar may have explained why he, too, was christened Bright and Shining.

Miguel, w h o must have told himself he was unpopular for being smart or Latino—anything but for being a little p u d g y —promptly plunked himself on one of the blue mats, to b u r r o w with knit-browed seriousness into a battered copy of Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind.* Beside him, Greer, w h o made the mistake c o m m o n to rejects everywhere of assuming that outcasts like each other, was busy trying to engage him in a discussion of NATO's intervention in Kosovo.

Dana R o c c o arrived at 3:35. " C o m e on troops!" she rallied them. "Ziggy, that's all very dramatic, but this isn't ballet practice.

Can we get down to business here? This is a happy occasion, but it's still after-hours for me, and I'd like to get h o m e before Letterman."

At this point, the cafeteria worker arrived, carting a tray of cellophaned sandwiches. " W h e r e you want these, ma'am?"

he asked Rocco. "We got a order from Mr. Bevons to provide refreshments."

"Wasn't that thoughtful of D o n ! " she exclaimed.

Well. It was thoughtful of someone. And I have to say, the sandwiches were a nice touch, that little garnish of an authentic school occasion. But Kevin may have been over-egging the pudding a bit, and the gesture would cost him *collateral damage.*

"Ma'am, my shift's over now, you m i n d if I shoot a few? I just be over at the far end there, won't be no trouble. D o n ' t got no hoop in my neighborhood. I'd be m u c h obliged."

R o c c o would have hesitated—the noise would be a distraction—but the cafeteria worker was black.

Kevin must have been kicking himself for having left that basketball off in the corner, but by this time—3:40—he'd have

been more distracted by the no-show. Only nine of his ten party guests had reported for duty, along with one gate-crasher. This operation was not organized for latecomers, and as the meeting got underway he must have been frantically concocting a contingency plan to allow for the dilatory performance of Joshua Lukronsky.

" O h , gr-ooss!" said Laura, passing the platter. "Turkey *roll.*

Total waste of calories."

"First off, you guys," R o c c o began, "I want to congratulate you all on having been picked for this special award—"

" 0 - k a y ! " T h e lobby doors burst wide. *"Let's get in character!"*

Kevin would never have been quite so happy to see the consummately irritating Joshua Lukronsky. As the circle enlarged to make a place for Josh, Kevin crept out of the alcove and slipped downstairs with another Kryptonite. Although he was as quiet as he could be, the chain did rattle a little, and he may have been grateful for the banging of the cafeteria worker's basketball at that. Back up in the alcove, he slipped his last padlock and chain around the inside bars of the alcove's double doors.

Voila. Fish in a barrel.

Was he having second thoughts, or simply enjoying himself?

T h e i r meeting had proceeded another five minutes by the time Kevin advanced stealthily toward the rail w i t h his loaded crossbow. T h o u g h he drew into sight f r o m below, the group was too engrossed in planning their o w n accolades to look up.

"I could give a speech," Greer proposed. "Like on h o w the office of special prosecutor should be abolished? Because I think Kenneth Starr is evil incarnate!"

" W h a t about something a little less divisive?" R o c c o proposed.

"You don't want to alienate Republicans—"

"Wanna *bet?"*

A soft, rushing sound. Just as there is a tiny pause between lightning and thunderclap, there was a single, dense instant of silence between the arrow's *shsh-thunk* through Laura Woolford's Versace blouse and the point at which the other students began to scream.

— 4 3 8 —

" O h , my God!"

"Where'd it come from!"

"She's bleeding all O V E R ! "

Shsh-thunk. N o t yet struggled to his feet, Miguel took one in the gut. *Shsh-thunk.Jeff was* nailed between the shoulder blades as he bent over Laura Woolford. I can only conclude that for those many hours Kevin spent in our backyard, the litde black bull's-eye in the middle of all those concentric circles was in his mind's eye a perfect circle ofVersace viscose. Struck perfectly through the heart, she was dead.

"He's up there!" D e n n y pointed.

"Kids,get out! Run!" iLocco ordered, though she needn't have; the uninjured remainder had already stampeded toward the main exit, where they were giving new meaning to the term *panic bars.*

Yet given the position of the alcove, there wasn't one square foot in that gym that couldn't be penetrated from over its railing, as they were all soon to discover.

" O h , shit, I should have known!" screamed Joshua with an upward glance, rattling the equipment r o o m door that Mouse had already tried. "It's *KhatchadourianV'*

Shsh-thunk. As he pounded on the main doors calling for help while the arrow stuck in his back quivered, a shaft sank into the nape of Jeff Reeves's neck. As Mouse streaked to the boys'locker room exit and the doors gave just a litde and held fast, he took an arrow in the ass; it wouldn't kill him, but as he hobbled to the one last exit on the girls' side, he was surely beginning to realize that there was plenty of time for one that did.

Dana R o c c o got to the girls' exit at about the same time, weighed down by Laura's body in her arms—a fruitless but valiant effort that would feature prominently in the memorial service. Mouse met Rocco's eyes and shook his head. As his shrieking classmates began to circle from door to door in a churning motion like dough in a mixing bowl, Mouse shouted over the uproar, " T h e doors are locked! All the doors are locked!

Take cover!"

Behind *what?*

T h e cafeteria worker—less attuned to the School Shooting format than the students, w h o had been through whole preparatory assemblies and *got into character* right away-—had been easing along the walls as if feeling for one of those secret passageways in murder mysteries, moving slowly, attracting m i n i m u m attention.

T h e cinder block unavailing, he n o w crouched into a fetal ball, holding the basketball between the archer and his head. Kevin was doubtless

annoyed at having allowed any obstacle to remain in the gym however small, and the ineffectual protection just drew fire. *Shsh-phoot.* The ball was skewered.

"Kevin!" cried his English teacher, triangulating Mouse behind her body into the corner farthest from the alcove. "Please stop! Please, please stop!"

"Maleficence" Kevin hissed distinctly from overhead; Joshua said later that it was weird h o w you could hear this relatively quiet word above the din. For the duration, it was all that Kevin said. Thereafter, Kevin fixed his staunchest ally on the Gladstone faculty steadily in his sight and put an arrow straight between her eyes.

As she fell, Mouse was exposed in the corner, and though he began to crouch in the shelter of her body, he took another shaft that pierced a lung. That would teach him to share the secrets of computer viruses with mere cyber-dilettantes w h o were really much m o r e interested in archery.

But Mouse, in Joshua's view, had the right idea; so far, Lukronsky's scrabbling up all the thin blue sit-up mats and trying to fashion some kind of shield wasn't working nearly as well as it would have in the movies, and already t w o arrows had whizzed within inches of his head. Scooting over to Mouse's corner while Kevin was occupied with reaming Soweto Washington's powerful thighs, Joshua built himself an i m p r o m p t u lean-to in the corner constructed of the blue foam rubber, Dana R o c c o , Laura Woolford, and the groaning, half-conscious body of Mouse Ferguson. It was from this stuffy tent that he observed the denouement, peering from under Laura's armpit as Mouse's breath bubbled. It was hot, suffused with the rank fumes of fearful sweat and another, more disturbing smell that was nauseously cloying.

Giving up on safe haven, Greer Ulanov had marched right up to the wall that dropped from the alcove's railing, standing twenty feet immediately below their malevolent Cupid. She had finally found a bete noir more odious than Kenneth Starr.

"I hate you,you stupid creep!" she screeched."I hope you fry!

I hope they shoot you full of poison and I get to watch you die!"

It was a rapid conversion. Only the month before, she'd written an impassioned essay denouncing capital punishment.

Leaning over the railing, Kevin shot straight down, striking Greer through the foot. The arrow went through to the wooden floor, and pinned her where she stood. As she blanched and struggled to pull the arrow from the floor, he pinned her second foot as well. He could afford the fun; he must still have had fifty, sixty arrows in reserve.

By this time, the other injured had all crawled to the far wall, where they flopped like voodoo dolls stuck with pins.

Most bunched on the floor, trying to present the smallest targets possible. But Ziggy Randolph, yet unscathed, now strode to the very middle of the gym, where he presented himself with chest blown out, heels together, toes pronated. Dark and fine-featured, he was a striking boy with a commanding presence, though tritely effeminate in manner; I have never been sure if homosexuals'

limp-wristed gestures are innate, or studied.

"Khatchadourian!" Ziggy's voice resonated over the sound of sobbing. "Listen to me! You don't have to do this! Just put the bow on the floor, and let's talk. A lot of these guys'll be all right, if we just get some medics right away!"

It's worth inserting a reminder here that after Michael Carneal shot up that prayer group in Paducah, Kentucky, in 1997, a devout Heath High School senior, a preacher's son with the novelistic name Ben Strong, was feted from coast to coast for

having advanced soothingly on the shooter, urging the boy to p u t down his weapon and putting himself in mortal danger in the process. In response, according to legend, Carneal dropped the pistol and collapsed. D u e to nationwide hunger for heroes in events that were otherwise becoming irredeemable international embarrassments, the story was widely k n o w n . Strong was featured in *Time* magazine and interviewed on *Larry King Live.* Ziggy s o w n familiarity with this parable may have bolstered his courage to confront their assailant, and the unprecedented admiration that had met Ziggy's "coming out" to an assembly earlier that semester would have further enhanced his faith in his persuasive powers of oratory.

"I k n o w you must be really upset about something, okay?"

Ziggy continued; most of Kevin's victims were not yet dead, and someone was already feeling sorry for him. " I ' m sure you're hurting inside! But this is no way o u t — "

Unfortunately for Ziggy, the apocryphal nature of Ben Strong's stern, mesmerizing *Michael? Put down the gun!* would not c o m e out until the spring of 2000, w h e n a suit filed by the victims'

parents against more than fifty other parties—including parents, teachers, school officials, other teenagers, neighbors, the makers of " D o o m " and " Q u a k e " video games, and the f d m producers of *The Basketball Diaries* —came to trial in circuit court. U n d e r oath, Strong confessed that an initially sloppy rendition of events to his principal had been further embellished by the media and taken on a life of its own. Trapped in a lie, he'd been miserable ever since. Apparently by the time our hero approached, Michael Carneal had already stopped shooting and had collapsed, his surrender unrelated to any eloquent, death-defying appeal. " H e just got done," Strong testified, "and he dropped it."

Shsh-thunk. Ziggy staggered backward.

I hope I haven't related this chronology in so dispassionate a fashion that I seem callous. It's just that the facts remain bigger, bolder, and more glistening than any one small grief. I'm simply reiterating a sequence of events strung together by *Newsweek.*

In parroting its copy, however, I do not pretend any remarkable insight into Kevin's state of mind, the one foreign country into which I have been most reluctant to set foot. Descriptions from Joshua and Soweto of our son's expression from overhead depart from the reportage of similar events. Those Columbine chddren, for example, were manic, eyes glazed, grinning crazdy. Kevin, by contrast, was described as "concentrated" and "deadpan." But then, he always looked that way on the archery range, if only on the archery range, come to think of it—as if he became the arrow, and thus discovered in this embodiment the sense of purpose that his phlegmatic dady persona so extravagandy lacked.

Yet I have reflected on the fact that for most of us, there is a hard, impassable barrier between the most imaginatively detailed depravity and its real-life execution. It's the same solid steel wall that inserts itself between a knife and my wrist even w h e n I ' m at my most disconsolate. So h o w was Kevin able to raise that crossbow, point it at Laura's breastbone, and then really, actually, in time and space, squeeze the release? I can only assume that he discovered what I never wish to. That there is no barrier.

That hke my trips abroad or this ludicrous scheme of bike locks and invitations on school stationery, the very squeezing of that release can be broken down into a series of simple constituent parts. It may be no more miraculous to pull the trigger of a b o w or a gun than it is to reach for a glass of water. I fear that crossing into the "unthinkable" turns out to be no more athletic than stepping across the threshold of an ordinary room; and that, if you will, is the trick. T h e secret. As ever, the secret is that there is no secret. He must almost have wanted to giggle, t h o u g h that is not his style; those C o l u m b i n e kids *did* giggle. A n d once you have f o u n d out that there is nothing to stop you—that the barrier, so seemingly uncrossable, is *all in your head*—it must be possible to step back and forth across that threshold again and again, shot after shot, as if an unintimidating pipsqueak has drawn a line across the carpet that you must not pass and you launch tauntingly over it, back and over it, in a m o c k i n g little dance.

That said, it is the last bit that harrows me most. I have no metaphors to help us.

If it seems extraordinary that no one responded to the cries for help, the gym is isolated, and the stragglers at the school w h o later admitted to hearing screams and shouts understandably assumed that an exciting or fractious sporting event was underway. There was no telltale crack of gunfire. And the most obvious explanation for this absence of alarm is that, while it may take a while to tell, the melee couldn't have lasted more than ten minutes. But if Kevin had entered into some sort of altered mental state, it was far more sustained than ten minutes.

Soweto passed out, which probably saved him. As Joshua remained motionless, his fleshy fortress shook from a systematic rain of arrows, some combination of which would finish Mouse Ferguson . Shouts for help or wails of pain further down the wall were silenced with additional shots. He took his time, Franklin—emptying both buckets, until that line of hmp casualties bristled hke a family of porcupines. But more appalling than this cheap archery practice—his victims could no longer be regarded as moving targets—was its cessation. It's surprisingly difficult to kill people with a crossbow. Kevin knew that. And so he waited.

W h e n at last at 5:40 a security guard jingled by to lock up, was dismayed by the Kryptonite, and peeked through the crack of the door to see red, Kevin waited. W h e n the pohce arrived with those massive but useless cutters (which the chain merely dented) and at length were driven to secure an electric metal saw that shrieked and spit sparks—all of which took time—Kevin put his feet up on the alcove rail and waited. Indeed, the protracted interlude between his last arrow and the SWAT team's final burst through the lobby door at 6:55 was one of those untenanted periods for which I'd advised him at age six that he'd be grateful for a book.

Laura Woolford and Dana Rocco were killed by the trauma of the arrows themselves. Ziggy, Mouse, Denny, Greer, Jeff, Miguel, and the cafeteria

worker all bled to death, trickle by drop.

4 4 4

(April 6,2001—Continued)

W h e n I wheeled out of the car, the lot was already j a m m e d with ambulances and police cars. A bunting of yellow tape marked its perimeter. It was just getting dark, and careworn paramedics were lit in ghoulish admixtures of red and blue. Stretcher after stretcher paraded into the lot—I was aghast; there seemed no end to them. Yet even amid pandemonium, a famdiar face will flash brighter than emergency vehicles, and my eyes seized on Kevin in a matter of seconds. It was a classic double take. Although I may have had my problems with our son, I was still relieved that he was alive. But I was denied the luxury of wallowing in my healthy maternal instincts. At a glance, it was obvious that he was not marching but *being marched* down the path from the gym by a brace of policemen, and the only reason he could possibly be holding his hands behind his back rather than swinging t h e m in his conventionally insolent saunter is that he hadn't any choice.

I felt dizzy. For a m o m e n t , the lights of the parking lot scattered into meaningless splotches, like the patterns behind the lids w h e n you rub your eyes.

"Ma'am, I'm afraid you'd have to clear the area—." It was one of the officers w h o appeared at our door after the overpass incident, the heavier, more cynical of the pair. They must meet a plethora of wide-eyed parents whose darling little reprobates issued " f r o m a good famdy," because he didn't seem to recognize my face.

"You don't understand," I said, adding the most difficult claim of fealty I'd ever m a d e , " *That's my son."*

His face hardened.This was an expression I would get used to; that, and the melting you-poor-dear-I-don't-know-what-to-say one, which was worse.

But I was not inured to it yet, and w h e n I asked him what had happened, I could already ted from the flinty look in his eye that whatever I was n o w indirectly responsible for, it was bad.

"We've had some casualties, ma'am," was all he was inclined to explain. "Best you came d o w n to the station. Just take 59 to

303, and exit at Orangeberg R o a d . Entrance on Town Hall R o a d .

That's *assuming* you've never been there before."

" C a n I—talk to him?"

"You'll have to see that officer there, ma'am. W i t h the cap?"

He hastened away.

Making my way toward the police car into whose back seat I'd seen a pohceman shove our son with a hand on the top of his head, I was forced to run a gamut, explaining with increasing fatigue w h o I was to a sequence of officers. I finally understood the N e w Testament story about St. Peter, and why he might have been driven to thrice deny association with some social pariah w h o ' d been set u p o n by a lynch mob. Repudiation may have been even more tempting for me than for Peter, since, whatever he might have styled himself, that boy was no messiah.

I finally battled to the Orangetown black-and-white, whose enveloping inscription on the side, " I n partnership with the community," no longer seemed to include me. Staring at the back window, I couldn't see through the glass for the blinking reflections. So I cupped my hand over the window. He wasn't crying or hanging his head. He turned to the window. He had no trouble looking me in the eye.

I had thought to scream, *What have you done?* But the hackneyed exclamation would have been self-servingly rhetorical, a flouting of

parental disavowal. I would k n o w the details soon enough. A n d I could not imagine a conversation that would be anything but ridiculous.

So we stared at each other in silence. Kevin's expression was placid. It still displayed remnants of resolution, but determination was already sliding to the quiet, self-satisfied complacency of a j o b well done. His eyes were strangely clear—unperturbed, almost peaceful—and I recognized their pellucidity from that morning, though breakfast already seemed ten years past. This was the stranger-son, the boy w h o dropped his corny, shuffling disguise of *I mean* and *I guess* for the plumb carriage and lucidity of a man with a mission.

— 4 4 6 —

He was pleased with himself, I could see that. A n d that's all I needed to know.

Yet w h e n I picture his face through that back w i n d o w now, I r e m e m b e r something else as well. He was searching. He was looking for something in my face. He looked for it very carefully and very hard, and then he leaned back a little in his seat. Whatever he'd been searching for, he hadn't f o u n d it, and this, too, seemed to satisfy h i m in some way. He didn't smile.

But he might as well have.

Driving to the Orangetown police station, I ' m afraid I got enraged with you, Franklin. It wasn't fair, but your mobile was still switched off, and you k n o w h o w one fixates on these small, logistical matters as a distraction. I wasn't able, yet, to get angry at Kevin, and it seemed safer to vent my frustrations on you, since you hadn't done anything wrong. Hitting that redial button over and over, I railed aloud at the wheel. " W h e r e *are* you? It's almost 7:30! Turn on the fucking phone! For God's sake, of all the nights, why did you have to work late *tonight*? A n d haven't you listened to the *news*?" But you didn't play the radio, in your truck; you preferred CDs of Springsteen, or Charlie Parker. *"Franklin, you son of a bitch!"* I shouted,

my tears still the hot, leaking, stingy ones of fury. " H o w could you make me go through this all by myself?"

I drove past Town Hall R o a d at first, since that slick, rather garish green-and-white building looks hke a chain steakhouse or subscription fitness center from the outside. Aside from its clumsily wrought bronze frieze memorializing four Orangetown officers fallen in the line of duty, the foyer, too, was an expanse of white walls and characterless linoleum where you would expect to find directions to the pool. But the reception r o o m itself was horrifyingly intimate, even more claustrophobically tiny than the emergency r o o m at Nyack Hospital.

I was accorded anything but priority status, though the receptionist did inform me coldly through the w i n d o w that I could accompany my " m i n o r " — a word that seemed inappropriately reductive—while he was booked. Panicked, I pleaded, " D o I have to?" and she said, "Suit yourself." She directed me to the single black vinyl sofa, to which I was abandoned untended as pohce officers raced back and forth. I felt both implicated and irrelevant. I didn't want to be there. In case that sounds like a grievous understatement, I mean that I had the novel experience of not wanting to be anywhere else, either. Flat out, I wished I were dead.

For a short time, on the opposite side of my sticky black vinyl couch sat a boy w h o m I now know to be Joshua Lukronsky. Even had I been familiar with this student, I doubt I'd have recognized him at that moment. A small boy, he no longer resembled an adolescent, but a child closer to Celia's age, for he lacked any of the wisecracking swagger for which he was apparently known at school. His shoulders were drawn in, his cropped black hair disheveled. Hands shoved inward in his lap, he kept his wrists bent at the unnaturally severe angle of children in the advanced stages of muscular dystrophy. He sat perfectly still. He never seemed to blink. Awarded a police minder that my own role didn't merit—I already had that feeling of being infected, contagious, quarantined—he didn't respond as the uniformed man standing next to him tried to interest him in a glassed-in case of model police vehicles. It was quite a charming collection, all metal, some very old— vans, horse trailers, motorcycles, '49

Fords from Florida, Philadelphia, L.A. With fatherly tenderness, the officer explained that one car was very rare, from the days that N e w York City pohce cars were green-and-white—before N Y P D blue. Joshua stared blankly straight ahead. If he knew I was there at all, he did not appear to know w h o I was, and I was hardly going to introduce myself. I wondered why this boy had not been taken to the hospital hke the others.There was no way of telling that none of the blood drenching his clothes belonged to him.

After a few minutes, a large, plump woman flew through the reception room door, swooping down on Joshua and lifting

h i m in a single motion into her arms. "Joshua!" she cried. At first h m p in her clasp, gradually those muscular-dystrophy wrists curled around her shoulders. His shirtsleeves left red smears on her ivory raincoat.The small face buried in her ample neck. I was simultaneously moved, and jealous. This was the reunion that I'd been denied. *I love you so much! I'm so, so relieved you're all right!*

Me, I was no longer entirely relieved that our o w n son was *all right.* From my glance in that car window, it was his very seeming *all tightness* that had begun to torment me.

T h e trio shuffled through the inside door. T h e officer behind the reception w i n d o w ignored me. If at wit's end, I was probably grateful for my little task with the mobile, which I worried like a rosary; dialing gave me something to do. If only for variety, I switched to trying our h o m e p h o n e for a while, but I kept getting the machine, and I'd hang up in the middle of that stilted recording, hating the sound of my o w n voice. I'd already left three, four messages, the first controlled, the last weeping—what a tape to come h o m e to. Realizing that we were both running late, R o b e r t had obviously taken Celia to McDonald's; she loved their hot apple pies.Why didn't *he* call me? He had my mobile number!

Hadn't *Robert* listened to the news? O h , I know, McDonald's broadcasts Muzak, and he wouldn't necessarily switch on his car radio for such a short trip. But wouldn't someone mention it while standing on hne? H o w could anyone in Rockland C o u n t y be talking about anything else?

By the time two officers fetched me into that plain little r o o m to take my statement, I was so distraught that I was less than polite. I probably sounded thick, too; I couldn't see the purpose of contacting our family's lawyer w h e n there didn't appear to be any question that Kevin did it. A n d this was the first time that anyone had seen fit to give his m o t h e r even the sketchiest l o w d o w n on did *what.* T h e casualty estimates that one officer rattled off matter-of-factly w o u l d later prove exaggerated, but back then I'd had no reason to have researched the fact that atrocity figures are almost always inflated w h e n first

released. Besides, what is the difference, really, b e t w e e n bearing a son w h o murders *only* nine people instead of thirteen? A n d I f o u n d their questions obscenely immaterial: h o w Kevin did in school, w h a t had he been hke that m o r n i n g .

" H e was a little testy with my husband! Otherwise, nothing special! W h a t was I supposed to do, my son was rude to his father, so I call the pohce?"

"Now, calm down Mrs. Kachourian—"

"Khatchadourian!" I insisted. " C a n you *please* get my name right?"

O h , they would.

"Mrs. *Khadourian,* then. W h e r e might your son have gotten that crossbow?"

"It was a Christmas present! O h , I *told* Franklin it was a mistake, I *told* him. Can I please call my husband again?"

T h e y allowed the call, and after another fruitless redial, I wilted. " I ' m so sorry," I whispered. " I ' m so sorry, I ' m so sorry. I didn't mean to be unkind to you, I don't care about my name, I hate my name. I never want to hear my name again. I ' m so sorry—"

"Mrs. Khadarian—" O n e officer patted my shoulder gingerly.

"Maybe we should take a full statement another time."

"It's just, I have a daughter, a little girl, Celia, at home, could y o u — "

"I understand. Now, I ' m afraid Kevin's going to have to stay in custody. Would you like to speak to your son?"

Picturing that smarmy, implacable expression of serenity I met through the pohce car window, I shuddered, covering my face with my hands. " N o . Please, no," I begged, feeling an awful coward. I must have sounded like Celia, imploring weakly not to be forced to bathe w h e n there was still all that dark, sticky horror lurking in the bathtub trap. "Please don't make me. Please don't.

I couldn't face him."

" T h e n maybe it would be best for n o w if you just went on home."

I stared at h i m stupidly. I was so ashamed, I honestly believed they were going to keep me in jail.

If only to fill the awkward silence as I just looked at him, he added gently, " O n c e we get a warrant, we will have to search your house. That'll probably be tomorrow, but don't you worry. O u r officers are very respectful. We won't turn the place upside down."

"You can b u r n that house for all I care," I said. "I hate it. I've always hated i t — "

T h e two looked at each other: *hysterical.* A n d they ushered me out the door.

Freed—I couldn't believe it—out in the parking lot, I wandered desolately past my car, fading to recognize it the first time d o w n the row; everything in what was already my old life had grown alien. A n d I was dumbfounded. H o w could they just let me go?

Even at this early juncture I must have begun to feel a deep need to be brought to book, to be called to account. I had to stop myself from pounding on the station door and importuning reception to please let me spend the night in a cell. Surely I belonged there. I was convinced that the only pallet on which I would be able to he peacefully that night would be a cheap, lumpy mattress with a scratchy institutional sheet, and the only lullaby that could possibly sing me to sleep would be the grit of cordovans on concrete and the distant clink of keys.

Yet once I found the car I became strangely calm. Sedate.

Methodical. Like Kevin. Keys. Lights. Seat belt.Windshield wipers on interval, for there was a thin mist. My mind went blank. I ceased talking to myself. I drove h o m e very slowly, braking on yellow, coming to a legally complete halt at the four-way stop, though there was no other traffic. A n d w h e n I curved up our long drive and noticed that n o n e of the lights were on, I thought nothing of it. I preferred not to.

I parked. Your truck was in the garage. I moved very slowly.

I turned off the wipers, and the lights. I locked the car. I put the keys in my Egyptian bag. I paused to think of some other small

everyday thing I needed to take care of before walking in the house; I picked a leaf off the windscreen, scooped your j u m p rope off the garage floor and h u n g it on its hook.

W h e n I turned on the light in the kitchen, I thought h o w unlike you it was to have left all those greasy breakfast dishes.The skillet for your sausage was upright in the drainer, but not the one for the French toast, and most of the plates and juice glasses were still on the counter. Sections of the *Times* splayed on the table, though taking the paper out to the stack in the garage every m o r n i n g was one of your neatnik obsessions. Flicking the next light switch, I could see at a glance that no one was in the dining room, living room, or den; that was the advantage of a house with no doors. Still I walked through every room. Slowly.

"Franklin?" I called. "Celia?" T h e sound of my own voice unnerved me. It was so small and tinny, and nothing came back.

As I advanced d o w n the hall, I paused at Ceha's b e d r o o m and had to force myself to walk in. It was dark. H e r bed was empty. T h e same, in the master bedroom, the bathrooms, out on the deck. Nothing. Nobody. W h e r e were you? H a d you gone looking for me? I had a mobile.You k n e w the number. And w h y wouldn't you have taken the truck? Was this a game? You were hiding, giggling in a closet with Celia.This of all nights you chose to play a game?

T h e house was empty. I felt a surging, regressive urge to call my mother.

I walked through it twice. T h o u g h I had checked the rooms before, the second time through I felt only deeper trepidation. It was as if there were someone in the house, a stranger, a burglar, and he was just out of view, stalking behind me, ducking under cabinets, clutching a cleaver. Finally, shaking, I returned to the kitchen.

T h e previous owners must have installed those floodlights in the back in expectation of lavish garden parties. We didn't inchne toward garden parties and rarely used the floods, but I was familiar with the switch: just to the left of the pantry, beside the sliding glass doors that opened to our banked backyard. This was

where I used to stand and watch you throw a baseball with Kevin, feeling wistful, left out. I felt a little that way at that m o m e n t —left out. As if you'd held some family celebration of great sentimental significance, and of all people I hadn't been invited. I must have kept my hand on that switch a good thirty seconds before I flipped it. If I had it to do over again, I'd have waited a few moments more. I would pay good money for every instant in my life without that image in it.

On the crest of the hill, the archery range lit up. Soon I would understand the drollery behind Kevin's lunchtime phone call to Lamont, when he'd apparently told R o b e r t not to bother to pick up Celia from school, since she was "unwell." Backed against the target was Celia-—standing at attention, still and trusting, as if eager to play "William Tell."

As I wrenched the door open and flailed up the rise, my haste was irrational. Celia would wait. Her body was affixed to the target by five arrows, which held her torso like stick-pins tacking one of her crimped self-portraits to a class bulletin board. As I stumbled nearer calling her name, she winked at me, grotesquely, with her head knocked back. Though I remembered putting in her prosthesis that morning, it was missing now.

There are things we know with our whole being without ever having to actively think them, at least with that verbal self-conscious prattle that chatters on the surface of our minds. It was hke that; I knew what else I would find without having to specify it to myself outright. So when, scrambling up to the archery range, I tripped over something sticking from bushes, I may have sickened, but I wasn't surprised. I recognized the obstacle in an instant. I had bought pairs of chocolate-brown Stove brogans from Banana Repubhc often enough.

O h , my beloved. I may need too badly to tell myself a story, but I've felt compelled to weave some thread of connection between the otherwise meaningless dishevelment of that backyard and the finest in the man I married.

With a good twenty minutes remaining before they had

to leave for school, you'd let the kids go out to play. In fact, it would have encouraged you that for once the two of t h e m were horsing around together— *bonding.* You dawdled through the *Times,* though it was the *Home* C-section on a Thursday, w h i c h wouldn't entice you. So you started on the breakfast dishes. You heard a scream. I don't doubt that you were out the sliding doors in a flash. From the b o t t o m of the hill, you went for him. You were a robust man, even in your fifties, still skipping rope forty-five minutes a day. It would have taken a lot to stop a man like you in his tracks. And you almost made it, t o o — a few yards from the crest, with the arrows raining.

So here is my theory: I believe you paused. Outside on the deck, with our daughter pinioned to an archery target with an arrow through her chest, while our firstborn pivoted on his m o u n d and sighted his o w n father down the shaft of his Christmas crossbow, you simply didn't believe it.There was such a thing as a good life.

It was possible to be a good dad, to put in the weekends and the picnics and the bedtime stories, and so to raise a decent, stalwart son. This was America. And you had done everything right. Ergo, this could n o t be happening.

So for a single, deadly m o m e n t this overweening conviction—what you wanted to see—fatally interposed itself. It is possible that your cerebrum even managed to reconfigure the image, to remix the sound track: Celia, pretty make-the-best-of-it Celia, darling look-on-the-bright-side Celia, is once more inured to her disability and tossing her fine gold hair cheerfully into the spring breeze. She isn't screaming, she's laughing. She's *shrieking* with laughter. T h e only reason Kevin's helpful girl Friday could conceivably be standing right in front of the target is to faithfully collect her brother's spent arrows—ah, Franklin, and wouldn't she. As for your handsome young son, he has been practicing archery for six years. He has been scrupulously instructed by well-compensated professionals, and he is nothing if not safety conscious. He would never point a loaded crossbow at another person's head, least of all at his o w n father's.

Clearly, the sunlight had played some visual trick. He is merely waving an upraised arm. He must be hoping, w i t h o u t saying as m u c h — h e is a teenager, after all—to apologize for lashing out at breakfast w i t h those harsh, ugly repudiations of everything his father has tried to do for him. He *is* interested in h o w the C a n o n works, and he hopes you'll explain w h a t " f -

stop" means another time. In truth he deeply admires his father's enterprise in having seized u p o n such a quirky profession, one that allows such creative latitude and independence. It's just awkward for an adolescent boy. T h e y get competitive at this age. T h e y want to take you on. Still the boy feels awful now, for having let fly. T h e fit of pique was all a lie. He treasures all those trips to Civil War battlefields, if only because war is something that only m e n can understand with other m e n , and he's learned o n e *heck* of a lot f r o m museums. Back in his r o o m some nights, he takes out those a u t u m n leaves you two collected on the grounds of T h e o d o r e Roosevelt's ancestral h o m e and pressed inside the *Encyclopedia Britannica* last year. Seeing that the colors are beginning to fade reminds him of the mortality of all things, but especially of his o w n father, and he cries. *Cries.* You will never see it; he will never tell you. But he doesn't have to. See?

T h e waving? He's waving for you to bring the camera. He's changed his mind, and w i t h another five minutes left before he has to catch the bus, he wants you to take some photographs after ad—to start the montage, Braveheart of the Palisades, for the foyer.

This masterful remake may not have lasted more than a second or two before it corrupted, as a frozen frame will bhster and crenellate before a hot projection lamp. B u t it would have lasted just long enough for Kevin to sink his first crippling shaft—perhaps the one I found angled through your throat and protruding from the back of your neck. It must have severed an artery; around your head, under the flood lamps, the grass was black. T h e

three other arrows—stuck in the hollow between your pectorals where I loved to rest my head, fixed fast into the

fibrous muscle of your broad rope-skipping calf, and extending from the groin whose pleasures we had so recently rediscovered together—were just-to-be-on-the-safe-side touches, hke a few extra stakes around the edges of a well-pitched tent.

All the same, I do wonder just how hard you struggled up that hill, really—wheezing, beginning to choke on your own blood.

It wasn't that you didn't care for her, but you may have grasped with a glance that it was too late to save Ceha. T h e fact she was no longer screaming was a bad sign. As for saving yourself, maybe it just wasn't in you. Stark in the glare of the floods, sharpened by the shadow cast by the shaft in your neck, the expression on your face—it was so disappointed.

A P R I L 8 , 2 0 0 1

Dearest Franklin,

I don't k n o w if you keep up with these things, but about a week ago a Chinese fighter plane ran into an American surveillance craft over the South China Sea. T h e Chinese pilot was probably drowned, and the crippled American spy plane landed on the Chinese island of Hainan. There seems to be some question as to whose craft hit whose. Anyway, it's b e c o m e quite a diplomatic showdown, and n o w China is holding the twenty-four American crew members hostage—for an apology, of all things. I haven't had the energy to follow w h o is and is not at fault, but I have been intrigued that world peace (or so they say) hangs in the balance over the sole matter of remorse. Previous to my education in such things, I might have f o u n d the situation exasperating. Just say you're sorry then, if that

wdl get t h e m back! But nowadays the matter of remorse looms great to me, and it neither surprises nor frustrates me that momentous events might be decided in accordance with it. Besides, so far this Hainan c o n u n d r u m is relatively simple. It is so m u c h more often the case that an apology brings no one back.

Lately, too, politics seems to have dissolved for me into a swarm of tiny, personal stories. I don't seem to believe in it anymore. There are only people and w h a t happens to them. Even that fracas in Florida—to me it was about a man w h o wanted to be president since he was a httle boy. W h o got so close that he could taste it. About a person and his sadness and his desperation to turn back the clock, to count again and again until the news is good at last—about his poignant denial. Similarly, I think less about trade restrictions and future arms sales to Taiwan than I do about those twenty-four young people, in a strange building with strange smells, fed meals that don't resemble the take-out Chinese they grew up with, sleeping badly, imagining the worst—being charged as a spy and rotting in a Chinese prison while diplomats trade acid communiques that no one lets them read. Young people w h o thought they were hungry for adventure until they got one.

I am sometimes awed by the same naivete of my own younger self—disheartened that Spain has trees, despairing that every unexplored frontier turns out to have food and weather. I wanted to go somewhere *else*, I thought. Witlessly, I conceived of myself as harboring an insatiable appetite for the exotic.

Well, Kevin has introduced me to a real foreign country. I can be sure of that, since the definition of the truly foreign locale is one that fosters a piercing and perpetual yearning to go home.

A couple of these small, truly foreign experiences I have held back. W h i c h isn't hke me. You remember h o w I once loved to return from a trip abroad and present you my cultural bric-a-brac, the kind of mundane how-they-do-things-elsewhere discoveries that you only make if you actually go there, hke the queer litde fact that in Thailand commercial loaves of bread aren't twist-tied at the heel of the loaf, but on the top.

As for the first tidbit I've withheld, I may be guilty of plain condescension. I should give you more credit, since Kevin's escapade screamed premeditation; in another life he might have grown up to do well at, say, staging large professional conferences—anything that's advertised as requiring "strong organizational abilities and problem-solving skills." H e n c e even you realize that *Thursday* being staged three days before he turned the age of full legal accountability was no coincidence. He may have been

virtually sixteen on *Thursday,* but in a statutory sense he was still fifteen, meaning that in N e w York state a more lenient raft of sentencing guidelines would apply, even if they threw the b o o k at him and tried h i m as an adult. Kevin is sure to have researched the fact that the law does not, like his father, *round up.*

Still, his lawyer did locate a range of convincing expert witnesses w h o told alarming medical anecdotes. Typically, downhearted but mild-mannered fifty-something goes on Prozac, experiences an acute personality flip into paranoia and dementia, shoots his whole family and then himself. I wonder, have you ever clutched at the pharmaceutical straw? O u r good son was just one of those unfortunate few whose reaction to antidepressants was adverse, so that instead of lightening his burdens the drug plunged him into darkness? Because I really tried to believe that myself for a while, especially during Kevin's trial.

T h o u g h that defense neither got him off completely nor released him into psychiatric care as intended, Kevin's sentence may have been slighdy more lenient for the doubt his lawyer raised over his chemical stability. After the sentencing hearing at which Kevin got seven years, I thanked his lawyer, J o h n Goddard, outside the courthouse. I didn't, in fact, feel very grateful at the time—seven years had never seemed so short—but I did appreciate that J o h n had done his best at a disagreeable job. Scrambling for something of substance to admire, I commended his inventive approach to the case. I said I'd never heard of Prozac's alleged psychotic effect on some patients or I'd never have allowed Kevin to take it.

" O h , don't thank me, thank Kevin," said J o h n easily. "I'd never heard of the psychosis thing, either. T h a t w h o l e approach was his idea."

" B u t — h e wouldn't have had access to a library, would he?"

" N o , not in pretrial detention." He looked at me with real sympathy for a m o m e n t . "I hardly needed to lift a finger, frankly.

He k n e w all the citations. Even the names and locations of expert witnesses. That's a bright boy you've got, Eva." But he didn't sound upbeat. He sounded depressed.

As for the second tidbit—regarding h o w they do things in that faraway land where fifteen-year-olds murder their classmates—I haven't held it back because I thought you couldn't take it. I just didn't want to think about it myself or subject you to it, though until this very afternoon I was living in eternal fear that the episode would repeat itself.

It was perhaps three months after *Thursday.* Kevin had already been tried and sentenced, and I had recently installed those robotic Saturday visits to Chatham in my routine. We had still not learned to talk to one another, and the time dragged. In those days the conceit on his part ran that my visits were an imposition, that he dreaded my arrival and applauded my departure, and that his real family was inside, among his worshipful juvenile boosters.

W h e n I informed him that Mary Woolford had just filed suit, I was surprised that he didn't seem gratified but only the more disgruntled; as Kevin would later object, *why should I get all the credit?* So I said, that's a fine h o w do you do, isn't it, after I lose my husband and daughter? To get sued? He grunted something about my feeling sorry for myself.

" D o n ' t *you?"* I said. " D o n ' t you feel sorry for me?"

He shrugged. " G o t out of this safe and sound, didn't you? N o t a scratch."

" D i d I?" I added, "And why was that, anyway?"

" W h e n you're putting on a show, you don't shoot the audience," he said smoothly, rolling something in his right hand.

"You mean leaving me alive was the best revenge." We were already way beyond revenge-for-what.

I couldn't talk about anything m o r e to do w i t h *Thursday* at that point, and I was about to resort to the old are-they-feeding-you-all-right, w h e n my eye was drawn again by the object he kept palming f r o m hand to hand, palpating it rhythmically w i t h his fingers hke a string of w o r r y beads. Honestly, I just wanted to change the subject, I didn't care at all about his toy— t h o u g h if I t o o k his fidgeting as a sign of moral discomfort in the presence of a w o m a n whose family he had slaughtered, I was sadly mistaken.

" W h a t is that?" I asked. " W h a t have you got there?"

W i t h a small, crafty smile, he opened his palm, displaying his talisman with the shy pride of a boy with his prize shooting marble. I stood up so quickly that my chair clattered backward onto the floor. It isn't often that w h e n you look at an object, it looks back.

" D o n ' t you ever pull that out again," I said hoarsely. "If you do, I will never come back here. N o t ever. Do you hear me?"

I think he k n e w that I meant it. W h i c h gave him a powerful amulet to ward off these ostensibly pestilential visits from *Mumsey.*

T h e fact that Celia's glass eye has remained out of my sight since can only mean, I suppose, that, on balance, he's glad I come.

You probably think that I ' m just telling more tales, the meaner the better. W h a t a hideous boy we have, I must be saying, to torment his mother with so ghasdy a souvenir. N o , not this time.

It's just that I had to tell you that story in order that you better understand the next one, from this very afternoon.

You surely noticed the date. It's the two-year anniversary.

W h i c h also means that in three days, Kevin will be eighteen. For the purposes of voting (which as a convicted felon he will be banned from doing in all but two states) and enlisting in the armed services, that's w h e n he officially becomes a grown-up. But on this one I ' m more inclined to side with the judicial system, which tried him as an adult two years ago. To me the day on which we all formally came of age will always be April 8th, 1999.

So I put in a special request to meet with our son this afternoon. T h o u g h they routinely turn d o w n appeals to meet with inmates on birthdays, my request was granted. Maybe this is the kind of sentimentality that prison warders appreciate.

W h e n Kevin was issued in, I noticed a change in his demeanor before he said a word. All that snide condescension had fallen away, and I finally appreciated h o w fatiguing it must be for Kevin to generate this world-weary who-gives-a-fuck the hvelong day.

Given the epidemic thieving of small-sized sweats and T-shirts, Claverack has given up on its experiment in street clothes, so he was wearing an orange jumpsuit—for once one that wasn't only normal-sized but too big for him, in w h i c h he looked dwarfed.

Three days from adulthood, Kevin is finally starting to act hke a litde boy—confused, bereft. His eyes had shed their glaze and tunneled to the back of his head.

"You don't look too happy," I ventured.

"Have I ever?" His tone was wan.

Curious, I asked, "Is something bothering you?" though the rules of our engagement proscribe such a direct and motherly solicitation.

T h e more extraordinary, he answered me. " I ' m almost eighteen, aren't I?" He rubbed his face."Outta here. I heard they don't waste m u c h time."

"A real prison," I said.

"I don't know.This place is sure real e n o u g h for me."

" . . . D o e s the move to Sing Sing make you nervous?"

"Nervous?" he asked incredulously. *"Nervous]* Do you k n o w *anything* about those places?" He shook his head in dismay.

I looked at him in wonder. He was shaking. Over the course of the last two years, he has acquired a maze of tiny battle scars across his face, and his nose is no longer quite straight. T h e effect doesn't make him look tougher, but disarranged. T h e scars have smudged the once sharp, Armenian cut of his features into a doughier blur. He could have been drawn by an uncertain portraitist w h o constantly resorts to an eraser.

"I'll still come to visit you," I promised, bracing myself for sarcastic reproof.

"Thanks. I was hoping you would."

Incredulous, I ' m afraid I stared. As a test, I brought up the news from March. "You always seem to keep up with these things. So I assume you saw the stories out of San Diego last month? You have two more *colleagues."*

"You mean, Andy, u h — A n d y Williams?" Kevin remembered vaguely. " W h a t a sucker. Wanna k n o w the truth, I felt sorry for the chump. He's been had."

"I warned you this fad would grow passe," I said. "Andy Williams didn't make the headlines, did you notice? Dick Cheney's heart problems and that huge storm-that-never-happened both got bigger biding in the *NewYork Times.* A n d the second shooting, on its heels—with one fatality, in San Diego, too? That got almost no coverage at ad."

" H e d , that guy was *eighteen."* Kevin shook his head. "I mean, really. D o n ' t you think he was a litde old for it?"

"You know, I saw you on TV."

" O h , that." He squirmed with a tinge of embarrassment. "It was f d m e d a w h d e ago, you know. I was into a—thing."

"Yes, I didn't have a lot of time for the *thing, "I* said. "But you were still—you were very articulate. You present yourself very well. N o w all you have to come up with is something to say."

He chuckled. "You mean that isn't horseshit."

"You do k n o w what day it is, don't you?" I introduced shyly.

" W h y they let me come see you on a Monday?"

" O h , sure. It's my *anniversary."* He is fmady turning that sardonicism on himself.

"I just wanted to ask you—," I began, and licked my lips.You're going to think this curious, Franklin, but I had never put this question to him before. I'm not sure why; maybe I didn't want to be insulted with a lot of rubbish lik *e jumping into the screen.*

"It's been two years," I proceeded. "I miss your father, Kevin.

I still talk to him. I even write to him, if you can believe it.

I write h i m letters. And n o w they're in a big messy stack on my desk, because I don't k n o w his address. I miss your sister, too—badly. And so many other families are still so sad. I realize that journalists, and therapists, maybe other inmates ask you all the time. But you've never told me. So please, look me in the eye.

You killed eleven people. My husband. My daughter. Look me in the eye, and tell me why."

Unlike the day he t u r n e d to me through the police car window, pupils glinting, Kevin met my gaze this afternoon w i t h supreme difficulty. His eyes kept shuttering away, making contact in sorties, then flickering back toward the gaily painted cinder-block wall. A n d at last gave up, staring a little to the side of my face.

"I used to think I knew," he said glumly. " N o w I'm not so sure."

W i t h o u t thinking, I extended my hand across the table and clasped his. He didn't pull away. " T h a n k you," I said.

Does my gratitude seem odd? In fact, I'd harbored no preconception of what answer I wanted. I certainly had no interest in an explanation that reduced the ineffable enormity of w h a t he had d o n e to a pat sociological aphorism about

"alienation" out of *Time* magazine or a cheap psychological construct hke "attachment disorder" that his counselors were always retailing at Claverack. So I was astonished to discover that his answer was word-perfect. For Kevin, progress was deconstruction. He w o u l d only begin to p l u m b his o w n depths by first finding himself unfathomable.

W h e n he did pull his hand back at last, it was to reach into his coverall pocket."Listen," he said."I made you something. A—well—sort of a present."

As he withdrew a dark rectangular w o o d e n box about five inches long, I apologized."I k n o w it's your birthday coming up. I haven't forgotten. I'll bring your present next time."

" D o n ' t bother," he said, polishing the oiled w o o d with a wad of toilet paper. "It'd just get ripped off in here anyway."

Carefully, he slid the box across the table, keeping two fingers on the top. It wasn't quite rectangular after all, but coffin-shaped, 464

w i t h hinges on one side and tiny brass hooks on the other. He must have made it in shop. T h e m o r b i d shape seemed typical, of course. T h e gesture, however, moved me, and the workmanship was surprisingly fine. He'd given me a f e w Christmas presents in the olden days, but I always k n e w you'd b o u g h t them, and he'd never given me anything while inside.

"It's very nicely made," I said sincerely. "Is it for jewelry?" I reached for the box, but he kept his fingers on it fast.

"Don't!" he said sharply. "I mean, please. Whatever you do.

D o n ' t open it."

Ah. Instinctively, I shrank back. In an earlier incarnation,Kevin might have crafted this very same "present,"lined mockingly with pink satin. But he'd have relinquished it blithely—suppressing a grisly little smile as in innocent expectation I u n h o o k e d the clasps. Today it was his warning— *don't open it*—that may have constituted the greatest measure of my gift.

"I see," I said.'T thought this was one of your most precious possessions.Why ever would you give it up?" I was flushed, a little shocked, a little horrified really, and my tone was stinging.

"Well, sooner or later some g o o n was going to swipe it, and it'd get used for some cheap gag—you know, it'd t u r n up in somebody's soup. Besides. It was like she was, sort of, looking at me all the time. It started to get spooky."

"She is looking at you, Kevin. So is your father. Every day."

Staring at the table, he shoved the box a little farther toward me, then removed his hand. "Anyway, I t h o u g h t you might take this and, well, maybe you could, you k n o w — "

"Bury it," I finished for him. I felt heavy. It was an e n o r m o u s request, for along with his dark-stained h o m e m a d e coffin I was to bury a great deal else.

Gravely, I agreed. W h e n I hugged him good-bye, he clung to me childishly, as he never had in childhood proper. I ' m n o t quite sure, since he muttered it into the u p t u r n e d codar of my coat, but I like to think that he choked, *"I'm sorry."* Taking the

risk that I'd heard correctly, I said distinctly myself, *"I'm sorry; too, Kevin.* I ' m sorry, too."

I will never forget sitting in that civil courtroom and hearing the judge with tiny pupils announce primly that the court finds for the defendant. I'd have expected to feel so reheved. B u t I didn't. Public vindication of my motherhood, I discovered, meant nothing to me. If anything, I was irate.

Supposedly we were all to go h o m e now, and I w o u l d feel redeemed. To the contrary, I k n e w I'd go h o m e and feel hideous, as usual, and desolate, as usual, and dirty, as usual. I'd wanted to be cleansed, but my experience on that b e n c h was m u c h like a typically sweaty, gritty a f t e r n o o n in a Ghana hotel r o o m : t u r n i n g on the shower to find that the water main was t u r n e d off. This disdainful rusty drip was the only baptism the law w o u l d afford me.

T h e sole aspect of the verdict that gave me the slightest satisfaction was being stuck with my o w n court costs. Although the judge may not have thought m u c h of Mary Woolford's case, she had clearly taken a personal dislike to me, and plain animosity from key parties (ask D e n n y Corbitt) can cost you. T h r o u g h o u t the trial I had been aware that I cut an unsympathetic figure. I had disciplined myself never to cry. I'd been loath to use you and Celia for so venal a purpose as ducking liability, and so the fact that my son had not only killed his classmates but my o w n husband and daughter tended to get lost in the shuffle. T h o u g h I k n o w they didn't mean to undermine my defense, that testimony from your parents about my fatally forthcoming visit to Gloucester was disastrous; we don't like mothers w h o "don't hke" their own sons.

I don't m u c h hke such mothers, either.

I had broken the most primitive of rules, profaned the most sacred of ties. Had I instead protested Kevin's innocence in the face of mountains of hard evidence to the contrary, had I railed against his "tormentors" for having driven him to it, had I insisted

that after he started taking Prozac "he was a completely different boy"—well, I guarantee you that Mary Woolford and that defense fund she raised through the Internet would have been forced to pay my court costs to the final dime. Instead, my demeanor was repeatedly described in the papers as "defiant," while my disagreeable characterizations of my o w n flesh and blood were submitted n o - c o m m e n t , to hang me out to dry. W i t h such an ice queen for a mother, litde wonder, observed our local *Journal News,* that *KK* turned *bad boy.*

Harvey was outraged, of course, and immediately whispered that we should appeal. Paying costs was punitive, he said. He should know; he was the one w h o would write the bill. But me, I was cheered up. I wanted a verdict that was punitive. I had already depleted all our liquid assets for Kevin s pricey defense and had taken out a second mortgage on Palisades Parade. So I k n e w immediately that I would have to sell AWAP, and I would have to sell our awful, empty house. N o w *that* was cleansing.

But since then—and throughout writing these letters to y o u —

I have c o m e full circle, making a j o u r n e y m u c h like Kevin's own.

In asking petulandy whether *Thursday* was my fault, I have had to go backward, to deconstruct. It is possible that I am asking the wrong question. In any event, by thrashing between exoneration and excoriation, I have only tired myself out. I don't know. At the end of the day, I have no idea, and that pure, serene ignorance has become, itself, a funny kind of solace. T h e truth

is, if I decided I was innocent, or I decided I was guilty, what difference would it make? If I arrived at the right answer, would you come home?

This is all I know. That on the 11th of April, 1983, unto me a son was born, and I felt nothing. O n c e again, the truth is always larger than what we make of it. As that infant squirmed on my breast, from which he shrank in such distaste, I spurned him in return—he may have been a fifteenth my size, but it seemed fair at the time. Since that m o m e n t we have fought one another with an unrelenting ferocity that I can almost admire. But it must be

possible to earn a devotion by testing an antagonism to its very limit, to bring people closer through the very act of pushing t h e m away. Because after three days short of eighteen years, I can finally announce that I am too exhausted and too confused and too lonely to keep fighting, and if only out of desperation or even laziness I love my son. He has five grim years left to serve in an adult penitentiary, and I cannot vouch for what will walk out the other side. But in the meantime, there is a second bedroom in my serviceable apartment. T h e bedspread is plain. A copy of *Robin Hood* lies on the bookshelf. A n d the sheets are clean.

Forever your loving wife,

Eva

Table of Contents

Start